

The Image of the Turks in the Vitae of the Neomartyrs of the Orthodox Church (Metropolitan Elpidoforos (Lambryniades) of Prusa)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The image that one nation has for another goes through different levels of the social, cultural, political and-of course-religious life. And this image is not simply formed or imposed by these life-factors, but is also and primarily ex-pressed through them.



What I want to say is that the official policy of a State can to a certain extent define and control through propaganda the image of a supposed enemy. This control, however, will never have a long-lasting and deep effect on the mentality of the ordinary people and on the common sense of any people.

The life-factor that goes really deep into the ordinary people's heart is faith in God. Religion. Faith is something that touches the deepest feelings of human beings. This is the reason why the worse kind of fanaticism is religious fanaticism, as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew always says. If you identify faith with love, peace and justice, then you have the deepest influence on the soul of your people. On the contrary, if you connect religious values with war, hatred and blood, then you produce the most dangerous people and tragic events in human history.

This is the reason why I chose to address the very delicate and sensitive topic of the image of the Turks in the descriptions of the death of Christian Saints during the Ottoman Empire which we encounter in their Vitae. Do we see any hatred, any propaganda against Islam or against Turkish people as the cause of their martyr-dom?

Before I turn to the Neomartyrs (yeni şehitler, in Turkish), I want to make some essential points about the martyrs of the Orthodox Church in general. This will clarify and bring out the significance of the Neomartyrs. We have many categories of Saints (Azizler) in the Orthodox Church. Martyrs are those Saints who suffered and sacrificed their lives, were tortured and murdered simply because they did not

want to deny their faith in Jesus Christ. The first such martyrs were primarily those saints who died under the persecutions of Christians by the Roman Empire, before Christianity became a lawful religion. The early Christians were persecuted because they were considered illegal. This is why at that time they practiced their faith in catacombs under the Earth, or in caves. The way of the martyr (şehit), although it leads with certainty to salvation, to deification, and sanctity, when a Christian remains faithful, is prescribed only in periods and places of persecution of Christians, and when personal circumstances call for it. Also a martyr's death in no way involves the death of other people. In the Christian faith, no one has to kill others to become a martyr, a şehit. Or, to put it the other way round, no one becomes a martyr when he dies in battle, while he kills others.

So much for the martyrs (şehitler) in general.

Christian martyrs, old and new, comprise one of the categories of Saints (Azizler) that are clearly distinguished from those who die fighting for a cause against others. Neomartyrs are those Orthodox Christians, men, women and teenagers, who found themselves during the Ottoman Empire (13th -20th century) in a situation which required of them to choose between either converting to the Muslim faith in order to preserve their lives, or suffering, torture and certain death if they persisted in remaining Orthodox Christians.

In addition, the Orthodox Neomartyrs also include Muslims who were born into the Islamic faith and freely became Orthodox Christians, as well as Orthodox Christians who converted to Islam at one time, often under unusual and bizarre circumstances, but later changed their minds and were given the same choice by the Ottoman authorities, either to return to the Muslim faith or, if they persisted as Orthodox Christians, to suffer torture and execution.

Examples of Muslim converts to Christianity, who were sentenced to death and are now Neo-martyr Saints (Yeni şehit azizler) are:

Amir Hodja (Hodja) il-Kudsii, in Jerusalem (1614)

Two anonymous Derviş in Rhodes (Rodas) (1622)

Defterdar Ahmet in Istanbul (1682)

Derviş Iskender in Thessaloniki (Selanik) (1794)

Yahya (John the Muslim) in Konitsa, Epiros (1814).

It is interesting to note that the means of death devised by the Ottoman

authorities for the Neomartyrs sometimes depended upon the disposition of the official who did the sentencing¹. The Islamic Law foresees three interrogations imposed by a Kadi (judge) and other judicial and administrative officials. In most instances, the interrogations were intended to convince Orthodox Christians to become Muslims or to return to Islam if they had left it.

The origins of the Neomartyrs

Istanbul was the capital and most important city of the Ottoman Empire. As such, it contained the largest Orthodox Christian population whose numbers were continuously augmented by a steady flow of immigrants from other parts of the empire, because of the economic opportunities it provided and promised. Perhaps it was because of this, that the honor of providing the largest number of Neomartyrs belonged to some of the less affluent areas of the empire.

The greatest number of Neomartyrs, 98 of them, originated in the areas of the empire known today as Greece, followed by 31 Neomartyrs who called Anadolu (Asia Minor) their home. Bulgaria came next with 15, then Istanbul with 7, Rumania with 7, Thrace (Trakya) with 5, Syria 5, Bosnia (Bosna) 2, Egypt 2, Albania 2, Russia 2, Cyprus 2, Georgia (Giircistan) 2, Serbia 2, Ukraine¹. In addition, there were 23 Neomartyrs whose origins are unknown to us.

The places of Martyrdoms

When we examine the places where the Neomartyrs were killed, it is not surprising, given the origins of the Neomartyrs, that the largest number, 68, suffered death within the boundaries of what is present-day Greece. Of the particular locations, the island of Chios (Sakizadasi) led with 10, followed by Thessaloniki (Selanik) with 9, and the island of Crete (Girit) with 8.

Istanbul however, led all the cities and towns with 54 martyrs. The reasons for this were the large Orthodox Christian population, the affluence of the capital city, and the presence of the Sultan and the Grand Vizier, the two highest officials of the empire, who also exercised judicial responsibilities. Moreover, since the Ottoman Muslims believed that public execution of the Neomartyrs would discourage Orthodox Christians who had converted to the Muslim faith from returning to Christianity, though it had the opposite effect, the number executed in Istanbul was important. Death in the imperial city, as it was probably supposed, would have a greater overall impact, since it was also the center of the Orthodox Christian world with the largest possible Orthodox Christian audience.

Muslim and Orthodox Christian Apostates

The Muslims who converted to Orthodox Christianity knew that by their change of faith they were giving up a very privileged and honored position in an Ottoman Muslim society. This included, among other things, more personal security, less tax-ation, better land to cultivate, and the acceptance of one's testimony in court. It also meant joining an element of society, which was discriminated against and was at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. Moreover, apostasy meant death.

There are five recorded instances of Muslims converting to Orthodox Christianity and suffering a martyr's death because they would not return to Islam.

The first is Amir Hodja (Hodja), the Muslim soldier who died in Jerusalem (Kudus) where he was stationed in 1614. Amir was attracted by the Easter services (Paskalya ayinleri) conducted at the Church of the Resurrection (Diriliş) and as a consequence became an Orthodox Christian and paid for this conversion with his life.

During the same century Ahmet, a Muslim Defterdar in Istanbul, was attracted to Orthodoxy because of his mistress, a Russian slave. Ahmet noted that after each time his mistress attended church services (kilise ayinleri), she emitted an incredible fragrance and when he asked the reason for this, she attributed it to eating antidoron (kutsal ekmek) and drinking blessed water (ayazma suyu). This drew him to the Patriarchal Church of Saint George (Aya Yorgi Patrikhane Kilisesi, Fener), where he was greatly impressed by the Divine Liturgy (Kutsal Ayin) celebrated by the Patriarch (Patrik) Dionysios IV. In the end this led Ahmet to seek conversion to Orthodox Christianity in the year 1682.

In the 18th century the sufferings of Neo-martyr Anastasios the farmer from Paramythia, Epiros (1750) so impressed Mehmet Paşa's son, Musa, that he secretly visited Anastasios in prison and not only became friends with the Neo-martyr but learned enough about Orthodox Christianity that he converted, taking the name of Dimitri. Later, Musa-Dimitri became a monk (keşiş) and as a monk he was renamed again to Daniel. His desire to die as a martyr was great, but each time he was dissuaded from fulfilling it by other Orthodox Christians who feared the consequences that would follow for the whole community of the Greek Christians upon the revelation that Musa was the son of a Muslim governor. The monk Musa-Dimitri--Daniel died in peace on the island of Corfu (Kerkyra).

The 19th century produced two Neomartyrs of Muslim descent: John (Yahya) the

Muslim from Konitsa (1814) and Constantine the Muslim from Mytilene (Midilli, 1819).

John (Yahya) who came from the Muslim aristocracy and was the son of a Derviş and şeyh from the town of Konitsa, was affected by the war between the Ottoman Muslim forces and the Russians in the area of the Ionian Islands. He suddenly began acting like an Orthodox Christian. Later he received baptism (vaftiz oldu) and married an Orthodox Christian woman. When he was discovered, he refused to return to Islam and was therefore beheaded.

Constantine the Muslim from Mytilene (Midilli, 1819) moved to Smyrna (İzmir) and worked there. He was attracted by the services and readings he heard at that city's cathedral church conducted by priest (papaz) Kallinikos. Constantine later became a monk on Mount Athos (Aynoroz), where he decided to confess his conversion in public. The latter event took place in Istanbul.

The Orthodox Christians who refused to apostatize were giving up the opportunity to attain the economic and social rewards that the Muslims enjoyed in addition to the many other privileges and comforts that an Islamic society provided for its own and withheld from non-Muslims. The testimony of Christians, for example, when challenged by Muslims was not accepted in Muslim courts, something obviously very important in general and particularly in the trials of Neomartyrs.

Although Islam does not ordinarily advocate forced conversions nor accept conversions based on sincere conviction, these provisions were frequently ignored.

Consequently, we have converts to Islam who converted to avoid punishment: Hacı-Theodore from the island of Mytilene (Midilli, 1784), Lukas from the city of Adrianople (Edirne 1802), and Markos from Smyrna (İzmir, 1801), who became involved with a Muslim woman and converted for this reason.

Nikodemos from Vithkuqi, Korca, Albania (Arnavutluk, 1722) abandoned his Orthodox faith in order to marry a fourth time, his previous three wives having died. The Orthodox Church does not allow a fourth marriage. Argiris the tailor (Terzi), on the other hand, became a Muslim to get out of jail in 1806, as did George the seaman from Chios (Saklızadah Aya Yorgi) in the next year, 1807. Hacı-George (Hacı-Yorgo) the sandalmaker from Philadelphia, converted to Islam in 1794, and Prokopios the monk (keşiş) in 1810, in order to extricate themselves from difficulties.

Constantine the servant (1800), Dimitri the Arkadian (1803), Gedeon the priest (papaz) from Kapourna (1818), Athanasios the servant (1819), and Nektarios the

camel attendant (deveci) (1820) became Muslim when in the employ of Muslims, while Theodore, George, Manuel and another George accepted Islam when they became prisoners of war and were enslaved in 1835.

Dimitri from Peloponnesos was converted while drunk (1794), as were Polydoros the merchant from Nicosia (Lefkosa) (1794) and George from New Ephesos.

Nicholas the baker's assistant from Metsovo was coerced into becoming Muslim in 1617, while Theofilos the sailor was forcibly circumcised (sunnet) in 1635, as were Lambros in 1835. Marko the student (1643) and George of Antalya (1823) became Muslims as children.

Angelis, Manuel, George and Nicholas from Crete (Girit) were crypto-Christians, who revealed themselves as Orthodox Christians after an uprising in Crete (Girit), which took place in conjunction with the Greek revolution. They died in 1824.

Prokopios the monk (kesis) from Varna, Bulgaria (1810), Gerasimos the servant (1812) and Akakios the shoemaker (1815) converted because of kindness on the part of Muslims. In contrast, Christophoros (1818) and Theodore the artist (1795) were attracted by the material advantages that Islam offered.

One of the last Orthodox Christians on record among the Neomartyrs, John the teenager from Bulgaria, became a Muslim for reasons that are unknown to us.

The most unusual case was perhaps Timotheos-Triantafyllos (1820), who became a Muslim to retrieve his wife who had run off and married a Muslim. The process of getting her back was much easier for him to accomplish as a Muslim. In the end he succeeded in being reunited with her. He then provided for her and later went off to a monastery (manastir) to prepare for the public rejection of Islam and to die.

The vast majority of Neomartyrs, however, found themselves in a position brought on by a variety of circumstances and events where they had to either convert to Muslim faith or, if they refused, stand as witnesses for their Orthodox Christian beliefs and die as a consequence. In these instances Orthodox Christians were actually being threatened with the loss of life, with no real attempt on the part of the Muslims to convince them of the truth of Islam. It would appear that the Muslims involved relied primarily on the pressures of a social consensus in Islamic society and the threat of death to ensure that converts would remain Muslims.

The grade of the tolerance in the Ottoman Empire began to decline and worsen as the failures of the Ottoman Muslims on the battlefield increased and the borders of the Empire began gradually to shrink. Some Neomartyrs were accused and

executed during military operations or ethnic uprisings, for having developed political activity against the Empire. Others were accused simply for having been a Muslim or for having baptized (vaftiz) a Muslim or for having promised to become a Muslim. Others were accused of insulting Mohammed the Prophet or Islam as religion.

The Decline

During the period of decline Muslim sacred Law (seriat) was continuously transgressed by the Muslim judicial and administrative authorities. The seriat, for example, prescribed death only for the crime of treason[2] and not for the various charges brought against the vast majority of Neomartyrs, most notably that of apostasy, which according to many Muslim authorities did not automatically bring the death penalty[3]. Thus the decline in Ottoman Muslim society in general and the Ottoman state in particular explains in some measure the great increase in numbers of Neo-martyrs from one century to the next.

In the 15th century there were 12 Neomartyrs.

In the 16th century there were 25.

In the 17th century 41.

In the 18th century 57.

And in the 19th century 66 .

These numbers, of course, are not completely accurate, for all who have dealt with the question are unanimous in their belief that the number of Neomartyrs is far greater because many left no record of their death. In fact there are some Neo-martyrs who are known to us by their name and very little else.

Mohammed and Islam as viewed by the Neomartyrs

Much information concerning life in general, and Orthodox Christian-Muslim relations in particular, in the Ottoman Empire, can be gleaned from a reading of the Lives of the Neomartyrs. In this part of my paper the information found in the Lives will be discussed in relation to 1) Mohammed and Islam as viewed by the Neomartyrs, and 2) the Islamic view of Orthodox Christianity as expressed by the Kadi's (judges) and other Muslim religious and administrative officials.

My information on these topics is derived almost exclusively from the statements, conversations and dialogues that took place between the Neomartyrs and their

interrogations during the trials and confrontations of the former with the various religious and administrative officials of the Ottoman Empire. To these are added contributions made by Muslim and Christian onlookers to the Neomartyrs' interrogations, which were almost always public.

It should be said at the outset that by and large the Neomartyrs, and in many instances their biographers, had a very limited and distorted view of the Muslim religion, which bore little resemblance to what Islam truly and normally advocated and taught as a religion. In addition, their own views of Mohammed the Prophet, as could be expected, were anything but respectful.

One must remember that this was polemical literature. Added to this is the fact that the Orthodox Christians in the Muslim Ottoman Empire were prohibited from attending a mosque, reading the Koran, or studying Islam in general, unless they wished to convert. One wonders where Orthodox Christians could have derived an accurate picture and understanding of the Muslim religion. We have only to recall the Life of Neo-martyr Nicholas the grocer (bakkal) from Karpenisi (1672), who was tricked into reciting the Muslim salibati (i.e. La ilaha ill-Allah oua Muhammad Resul Allah), considered a declaration and a commitment of faith by his Muslim language teacher who had plotted with other Muslims to bring about Nicholas' con-version to Islam.

By inserting the salibati in his Turkish language lesson, which was read by the unsuspecting Nicholas, the Muslims present accused him of voluntarily professing the Islamic faith. This example alone tells us how dangerous it was for Christians to be caught reading, if they could read Turkish or Arabic material concerning the Muslim faith, or even to be heard saying anything, even positive, concerning Islam. In Nicholas' case he was taken before the Kadi and told that he had a choice to make, either to accept conversion to Islam or die. Nicholas chose to die rather than give up his faith in Jesus Christ.

What knowledge Christians had concerning Islam they probably derived from observing their Muslim neighbours and from overhearing them in conversation, if they understood Turkish, or if the Muslims spoke Greek. Some knowledge of Islam was acquired by those few Orthodox Christians who had access to a Byzantine reservoir of literature, which began assembling information about Islam, beginning in the 8th century.

Ignorance about Orthodox Christianity also characterizes the Muslims with whom the Neomartyrs came in contact. But of course, being the dominant religious as well as the dominant social and political group, they felt no need to learn much

about Orthodoxy or Christianity in general. Thus it can be safely said that both Muslims and Christians held very superficial, inaccurate and distorted views of each other's religion and, not surprisingly given the general level of education, of their own as well. It should be emphasized that, with rare exceptions, there was no real desire on the part of either side to learn anything substantive about the other's religion. We must assume that the vast majority of Neomartyrs, as well as Orthodox people in general, learned what they knew from fleeting observations and casual conversations.

There is no doubt that the public execution of the Neomartyrs and their heroic public endurance of the many tortures inflicted upon them, which became widely known to other Orthodox Christians, contributed greatly to the buttressing of the Orthodox Christian faith of the various Orthodox Christian peoples living in Otto-man Muslim society.

Undoubtedly because the Neomartyrs on the whole represented the common Orthodox people, their relics, so dear to Orthodox Christians because they were vehicles of divine grace and contributed to miraculous cures, also enhanced the faith of many.

The collections of the different descriptions of their life and death were published and circulated among the Greeks as an attempt to inspire the Christians in the face of forced and voluntary conversions to Islam, to preserve and maintain their Orthodox faith in the face of all obstacles and hindrances. If confronted in a situation where a choice had to be made, they were encouraged by these collections to persist, despite anything and everything that might be inflicted upon them, and remain true to Jesus Christ. Finally, it must be stated that except for the Albanians and the Greek inhabitants of several Aegean Islands, which were protected for centuries by Latin powers, only those people who remained Orthodox Christians preserved their distinct cultures and were able to identify themselves later as Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians and Serbians. Hence if there are people today who consider themselves to be Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians and Serbians, it is because their ancestors remained Orthodox Christians despite the pressures to convert and all the advantages they could have enjoyed over a period of four to seven centuries. Those who did convert from among these peoples consider themselves to be Turks and or Muslims to this day.

At that time, the sense of nationality was not the same as it is today. Nationality was identical with religion. Thus, converting from one religion to the other meant automatically conversion from one nation to the other. It is not without significance that during the Ottoman Empire Greeks as Turks those Greeks who willing or forced

converted always considered to Islam. Even young Greek girls who were married to Turks (even if they were forced to do so), after the marriage had no contact with their families, since they had “become” Turks.

On the other hand, one reading the Life's of the New-Martyrs cannot only but discern a certain very clear difference on the description of the normal, simple Turks and the description of the Ottoman authorities. We can see on the descriptions Turkish people defending the accused Greek Christian and trying to find ways to save him from death. They are described as sensitive, kind and noble people, who do not ever participate in the injustices of the Kadi's or Vali's or other officials. We can see people from both sides to be able to fall in love with each other, to be able to form happy families. But after this, comes the Law, either Secular or Religious, identified in the person of the strict and non-human Authority, who brings the death and the torture in the life of the ordinary citizen. Nowhere in these descriptions of the Life's of the Neomartyrs we can find propaganda of hatred and nationalism against Islam or against the Turkish nation. The critics we see concerning the brutalities of some authority officials, could be done by a Turkish Moslem citizen of the Ottoman Empire as well. Don't forget that this unjust behavior was becoming worse while the Empire declined. It was a sign of disorder rather than the everyday experience.

This ability of the two nations to live together in peace when they are out of the influence of any kind of fanaticism, national or religious, is proven throughout the centuries and can be seen in every aspect of their lives. Especially the daily lives.

We are privileged in these days to see this realized again among Turkey and Greece. The decades long organized propaganda of mutual hatred and nationalism against each other collapsed so easily among the ordinary people of our both nations, that brought a certain uneasiness among some old minded policy makers of the past. And now, we can see the two nations, Turkish and Greek striving together for peace, human rights and European values, to become again one under the democratic and prosperous umbrella of the European Union.

1 The least painful of these deaths, it is surmised, was the beheading, which at least 92 of them suffered. This was followed by 52 who were hanged, 12 who were tortured to death, another 10 who were burned at the stake, 5 who were thrown onto iron spikes, 5 who were literally cut to pieces while still alive, 4 who were impaled, 3 who were dismembered, 2 who were stoned, 2 who were beaten to death, 1 who was stabbed to death, 1 who was shot with firearms, 1 who was drowned, 1 who died from a blow to the head, and 1 who was crucified by being

nailed to a tree. In addition, there were 16 whose manner of death is not known to us.

2 On crimes punishable by death see Uriel HEYD, *Studies in Old Ottoman Criminal Law*, ed. V. L. MENAGE, Oxford 1973, pp. 260-262.

3 See Maulana MUHAMMAD ALI, *The Religion of Islam: A Comprehensive Discussion of the Sources, Principles, and Practices of Islam*, Lahore 1990, pp. 438-439.

Source: Dr. Elpidophoros Lambriniades (Metropolitan of Prusa), "The image of the Turks in the vitae of the Neomartyrs of the Orthodox Church", in *Legacy of Achievement: Παρακαταθήκη Έργου, Metropolitan Methodios of Boston*, Festal Volume on the 25th Anniversary of his Consecration to the Episcopate (1982-2007), Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston, Boston 2008, σ. 598-608.