



# PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

## **Pre-Dissertation Award Final Report**

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My preliminary fieldwork examined recent cases of individual conversion from Islam to Christianity in Turkey. Hundreds of Muslim citizens, claiming Armenian descent, have sought the arbitration of secular legal authorities of the Turkish Republic to convert back to Christianity, the religion of their ancestors, and to instate their baptismal Christian Armenian names. Their conversion reverses an earlier practice. The applicants for conversion to Christianity are predominantly descendants of Armenians of the Ottoman Empire who had adopted Islam to avoid annihilation during the massacres that culminated in the genocide of 1915. The focus on Armenian converts is significant, as two realms of their struggle to convert back to their ancestors' religion, namely freedom of religion and minority rights, have been at the center of debates about Turkish secularism and the EU accession process.

In my preliminary research, I conducted fieldwork in five mid-level civil courts of Istanbul where registration of conversion and subsequent name change cases of the converted Armenians are administered. Here my research was guided by the ways in which law was enacted and experienced by social actors who participate in the legal process related to conversion. Non-participant observation in the courts provided important information about the strategies that converts use to establish their Armenian/Christian past and family genealogy, as well as motives for converting to Christianity. I have detailed the courts' activities, combining observations with careful analysis of selected cases, and analyzed the records around the questions of how arbitrations are argued and rationalized in the court and which legal concepts are referred to and how. My fieldwork in the courts also included interviews with judges, prosecutors, court-clerks, civil servants and lawyers. The purpose of these interviews was to reveal a broader context to the study of conversion within the Turkish legal context, such as perceptions of EU initiated legal reform, Nufus Kanunu (Population Law), and the different ways of addressing the "issue" of conversion.

Also, I have conducted a systematic survey of periodicals from 1979 to the present in Beyazit State Library in Istanbul, covering the lead up to and aftermath of the 1980 coup that marked many publicized conversions of Armenians to Islam. This part of my preliminary research provided me with the required knowledge of the historical and social background of religious conversion. I have explored commentaries and news items on conversion and minorities during the Republican era in both Turkish and Armenian. Although there is extensive historical research on the circumstances of Armenian conversion to Islam during the genocide of 1915, less well known is the fact that conversion to Islam continued throughout the Republican era, especially after the military coup d'état of 1980 that marked the mass conversion to Islam of a few remaining Armenian villages to avoid discrimination. The archival part of my preliminary research filled this gap. I covered the widely circulating Turkish dailies and Armenian papers published in Istanbul. I also reviewed legal regulations regarding religious conversion, population law (Nufus Kanunu) and civil law (Medeni

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Kanun) of the Turkish Republic, and EU reports and regulations on Turkey that presently form the legal basis of conversion procedures. This initial period of archival and documentary work allowed me to refine interview questions regarding the history of conversion in Turkey that later elicited relevant responses in the next step of my research. Through my archival research, I realized that conversion to Islam emerged as a common strategy for survival and avoiding discrimination among the Christian minorities of Turkey.

My preliminary research helped me to develop the main issues I will focus in my dissertation research which will center on the contradictory nature of the success of multicultural religious tolerance in the legal context of Turkey. I argue that the ambiguities of tolerance for minority religions in Turkey are particularly evident in the name change cases following conversion in which the legitimacy of the state is challenged by its own citizens and the international public on the issue of granting religious freedom and minority rights to ethnic/religious minorities in the EU accession process. By studying the social, political and legal ramifications of conversion to a minority religion in Turkey, dealing with everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion of converted Armenians into 'purported' national unity, as well as the claims of tolerance, justice, recognition, and multiculturalism on the side of the secular Turkish state as part of my preliminary research, I reconceptualized the main questions of my dissertation research. The main research focuses on the complex ways in which "converted Armenians" have imagined and related to the state that they are citizens of, their Muslim neighbors, and the ways these representations have reflected upon Armenian converts' struggle for claiming minority rights. I therefore ask two related questions in the research as a whole: First, how have images of "hidden Armenians" intervened in changing Turkish/majority notions of religious minority, security, loyalty, and the nation? Secondly, how have converted Armenians contributed to the re-imagination of the Turkish nation in the process of the EU accession through their court cases and everyday experiences? In this sense, my dissertation contributes to the larger field of studies on secularism, as well as a study on the status of religious minorities in secular nation-states. Thus, as a result of my preliminary research, I conceptualized my dissertation research as a case study of the nature of secular multiculturalism, as well as the notions through which it is discussed in Turkey's EU accession process - namely, tolerance, justice, legal reform, and genocide recognition. At the same time it is an ethnographic study of a crypto-religious group and their now-observed experience of violence and injustice.

CEREN OZGUL is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at CUNY Graduate Center.