

Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971) - 332 pages.

### **Recapitulation**

The Turkish conquest of Asia Minor and the Islamization of the area's inhabitants constitute the last major stage in the history of Hellenism outside the Greek peninsula. The expansion of Greek cultural boundaries beyond Greece proper began at an early date, engulfed the Levant in Hellenistic times, and became deeply rooted during three centuries of Roman imperial rule. Consequently, the process of Hellenization, though superficial outside the major urban centers in Syria or Egypt, was thorough in much of urban and rural Anatolia by the sixth century of the Christian era. The geographical boundaries of this Medieval Greek cultural world in the Levant were, thereafter, determined by military struggles with the various Islamic States. The Umayyad Empire caused the first major contraction of Byzantine political and cultural boundaries by the conquests of the seventh century, but after the loss of Syria and Egypt, the Byzantine and Islamic Empires attained an equilibrium within which a substantial portion of Anatolia remained Greek in language and religion. The invasions of the Muslim Turks in the eleventh century renewed the process of Muslim aggrandizement at the expense of the Greek Christian society, a process that was consummated in the fifteenth century. By this time the Turks had destroyed the empire of Constantinople and the Byzantined Slavic states of the Balkans, and by the Islamization-Turkification of Anatolia had restricted the Greek world largely to the southern Balkans. The cycle of expansion and contraction, which had endured for more than two millennia, finally returned to the original point of departure.

This book, which focuses on this late phase of Greek retrenchment, attempts to describe the critical factors in the decline of medieval Hellenism and the concomitant process of Islamization in Anatolia. The basic conclusions may be stated in terms of seven interrelated theses:

1. Anatolian Hellenism, or the Medieval Greek cultural element of Anatolia, was quantitatively and qualitatively significant during the Byzantine period. Thus, the Turkish conquest and Islamization of Asia Minor represent something more than a negative historical event, for the invaders had to subdue and absorb a vital society.

2. The Turks did not completely subdue the peninsula and subject it to political unification until the latter half of the fifteenth century.
3. The nature of the conquest and settlement caused major dislocation and destruction to Byzantine society. The Turkish conquest lasted almost four centuries, during which time the one unified, stable Byzantine administration was replaced by countless, smaller unstable political entities that were in an almost constant state of war with one another. Thus, much of Anatolia was transformed into the scene of continuous military strife. This condition and Muslim hegemony exercised a corrosive action upon the bonds and sentiments that held the Christian communities together, thus preparing the members for religious conversion. Though there is evidence for extensive conversion of Christians in the earlier period, as the of the mid-thirteenth century the Christians in the earlier period, as the of the mid-thirteenth century the Christians of Anatolia still constituted a large bulk of the populace, perhaps even the majority.
4. The political and historical events of the Turkish conquests in Asia Minor destroyed the Greek Church as an effective social, economic, and religious institution. Given the fact that religion permeated and formed practically every aspect of medieval society, the sharp decline of the Church was an unqualified disaster in the disappearance of the Byzantine character of Asia Minor.
5. Christian society, which had been subjected to such disruption and dislocation in the wake of the Turkish invasions, was isolated from the heartbeat of its own culture in Constantinople and deprived of ecclesiastical leadership in the provinces. Thus, it was ripe for absorption into the new Islamic society. This was largely the work of Islamic institutions supported by the political and economic favor of the various Turkish principalities. These Muslim institutions (based securely on the economic possessions and revenues formerly belonging to the Christian church), most important of which were the dervish orders, consummated to the cultural transformation by converting the Christians to Islam.
6. The great military disasters induced a considerable variety of etiological rationalization among the Anatolian Christians. To some the military conquests of the Turks proved the religious superiority of Islam over Christianity. Other saw in the Byzantine defeats either divine chastisement of an errant society, the chiliastic end of human history, or an impersonal *tyche* that arbitrarily raised and abased empires. Many, whether of religious or secular historical persuasion, contented

themselves with the prospect that the enslavement of the Greeks would, after a passage of time, be followed by the resurrection of the Greek Christian Empire.

7. Byzantine culture in Anatolia, though effaced on the level of formal culture by Islamic *Hochkultur*, exercised a determinant role in much of Turkish folk culture or *Tiefkultur*.

At this point one must note an apparent paradox. Though both Anatolia and the Balkans were conquered and subjected to centuries of Turkish rule, the Balkans, unlike Anatolia, remained predominantly Christian. On first glance, one sees that the Turkish presence in the Balkans lasted approximately four centuries whereas in Anatolia it endured for nine centuries. Thus, one might suppose that Islamization in Anatolia was more extensive because the transforming forces were at work for a much longer period. But this does not seem to be the real explanation because the mass Islamization of the Anatolian Christians had already transpired by the fifteenth century, and the proportion of the Christian population to that of the Muslims in Anatolia remained relatively constant thereafter (though by the nineteenth century the proportion of Christians had increased). The answer to the question lies in a combination of factors. The Turkish conquest of the Balkans, beginning in 1354 and culminating in the reign of Muhammad II, was not nearly so prolonged or repeated a process as it was in Anatolia, and Turkish colonization (particularly of Turkmens) was not as heavy as it had been in Anatolia. The conquests and colonization were effected by one strongly centralized government that made every effort to restore order in the conquered provinces and to enforce obedience among the Turkmens, so that the state might reap the maximum fruits of an economically productive empire. Of great significance was the fact that the Balkan Christian communities were not cut off from the leadership and discipline of their ecclesiastical institution for a prolonged period. Muhammad, shortly after the conquest of Constantinople re-constituted the Greek patriarchate as the head of all the Orthodox Christians within the Balkan and Anatolian provinces of his empire. Thus the patriarchate, and therefore the Orthodox Church, enjoyed a more regularized and uniform position in Turkish lands than had been the case prior to 1454. Up until Muhammad destroyed the Byzantine Empire, the patriarch and the church were associated with the foes of the Turkish states, and hence the clerics and properties of the church in Turkish lands were a legitimate prey for the Turks. Despite all these more favorable circumstances, Balkan Christians did apostatize to Islam in large numbers, both before and after 1453.

The last great cultural transformations in the Mediterranean basin occurred, simultaneously, as its western and eastern extremities, the two border regions between Christianity and Islam. In each case political-military events determined the cultural evolution of the Iberian and Anatolian peninsulas. The Spanish *reconquista* not only removed the Islamic political state but resulted in the Christianization and Hispanization of the populace. The Turkish conquest led to the Islamization and Turkification of the Anatolian populations and to the destruction of the Byzantine Empire. The disappearance of Greek in Anatolia and of Arabic in Spain was accompanied by the effort to write Spanish in the Arabic script and Turkish in the Greek alphabet. The role of refugees from both areas was particularly important in the struggle between Islam and Christianity in the Mediterranean during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Greek refugees fled the Turkish conquests and established themselves in Italy and the West where they often spurred Western rulers to institute crusades for the purpose of destroying the Ottoman Empire; Spanish Muslims and Jews embittered by their fate in Spain, migrated to the Ottoman Empire where they heightened the anti-Christian tenor of Ottoman expansion into central Europe.