

CONVERSION AND ASSIMILATION OF *DHIMMĪS* IN THE
OTTOMAN EMPIRE: A CASE OF MANASTIR WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO 18th CENTURY
JUDICIAL RECORDS*

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Introduction

Dhimmī is an Arabic word derived from *dhimmah*, which literally means pledge, guarantee, safety, etc. Generally, a non-Muslim subject in Islamic law is called a *dhimmī*, and the term is applied to all non-Muslim subjects under a Muslim government. The term *dhimmah* implies an indefinitely renewable contract through which the Muslim community accords hospitality and protection to members of other religions on the condition that they acknowledge the domination of Islam. Hence, the beneficiaries of the *dhimmah* are called *dhimmīs* and are collectively referred to as *ahl al-dhimmah*.¹ The principal guidelines for the treatment of *dhimmīs* are illustrated in several places of the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet, which speak of strengthening and cementing relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants.² Besides this, the principles upon which *dhimmīs* were to be dealt with by Muslim rulers evolved in the early centuries of Muslim history and are variously defined by jurists of different schools of law. However, these jurists had based their opinion on the attitude of the Prophet to the other religions with which he was acquainted, and to the problem of opposition to his mission. Thus, by the terms of his contract with the *dhimmīs*, a

¹ C. Cahen and Chafik Chehata, "Dhimma", *Et*², vol.: 2, 227, 231; A. I. Doi, *Non-Muslims Under Shari'ah (Islamic Law)*, (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 1994), 2nd print, 22; B. Braude and B. Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol.: 1, (New York & London: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 5.

² For instance, see the following Qur'anic verses: *al-'Ankabūt* (29): 46; and *al-Mumtahinah* (60): 8-9.

Muslim ruler had to guarantee their safety, liberty and property, and allow them to practise their religion in peace.³

The development that led to the formation of the Ottoman Empire resembled in some ways that which led to the formation of the Caliphate during the first century of Islam. Both had the effect of spreading Islam to people belonging to other faiths and/or bringing large territories into the domain of Islam. During Ottoman rule, the Balkan peninsula and Anatolia were mainly inhabited by three kinds of *dhimmīs*, orthodox-Christians, Armenians, and Jews. In the Balkans alone *dhimmīs* were predominantly those from the orthodox-Christian sect. The orthodox-Christians consisted mainly of Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Bosnians, and the inhabitants of southern Albania. As for those within the Macedonian territories, including the constituency of Manastir, comprised Greeks, Vllachs, Slavic-Macedonians and others. The Jews that settled in various parts of Macedonia, and in particular in Manastir, during the 15th century and onwards, were generally from Spain.⁴

The policy of the Ottomans toward their Christian and Jewish subjects were part of a larger pattern of relations between Muslims and *dhimmīs* that emerged over centuries of Muslim rule. The Ottomans, like previous Muslim administrations, considered non-Muslim subjects to be autonomous, but dependent peoples whose internal social, religious, and communal life was to be regulated by their own religious organizations, but whose leaders were appointed by, and responsible to, a Muslim state. However, it should be pointed out that the Ottomans also used the generic terms *tā'ifah* (group), *millet* (nation), or *jamā'at* (religious community) to describe non-

³ C. Cahen and Chafik Chehata, "Dhimma", *EP*, vol.: 2, 227, 231; A. I. Doi, *Non-Muslims Under Shari'ah (Islamic Law)*, 22; B. Braude and B. Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol.: 1, 5.

⁴ All these are confirmed by a large number of documents available in the *qādi sijils* (judicial records) and other official documents, be they of Manastir judicial records or other places of the Ottoman Empire.