Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo

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Citation for published version (APA):

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CHAPTER 3

The Martyrs of Stubla: Albanian Crypto-Catholics and the Franciscan Mission

During the winter of 1845-1846, almost a century and a half before the mass exodus of Croats, the parish of Letnica was the scene of another exodus, this time caused by processes of religious rather than ethnic fermentation. At the instigation of the local Ottoman pasha, twenty-five Albanian families from the neighbouring village of Stubla and some other Albanian hamlets —about 160 persons— were deported to Anatolia after they publicly renounced Islam and declared themselves Catholics. They claimed to be Crypto-Catholics who wanted to return to their ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ Catholic faith. Their conversion was rejected by conservative Muslim circles which feared that recognition might lead to new waves of collective apostasy. The deportation of crypto-Catholics seems to have been primarily aimed at deterring others from openly becoming Catholics. Eventually the survivors were allowed to return home after foreign diplomatic intervention, in particular from France. Nearly a hundred crypto-Catholics died during the three years of their exile. They have become the so-called ‘Martyrs of Stubla’.

This case is illustrative of the conditions in Kosovo during the late Ottoman period, when religious divisions were still more important than ethnic ones. Religion was the dominant marker of identity, in this case dividing Albanians into Muslims and Christians, or into those conservative circles who were determined to defend Muslim hegemony against those who were or intended to become Catholics. Yet this case also marks the beginning of a new period of Ottoman reforms, which led to attempts by the Roman Catholic church, notably the Franciscan order, to gain back some of the souls which had been lost to Islam during the long period of Ottoman rule. The development of the Marian devotion in Letnica, as well as the policy of conferring the sacrament on non-Catholics, were the main devices used to accomplish this, i.e. to re-Catholicize part of the
population in the Karadag mountains. The concept of crypto-Christianity was instrumental in church policy. Instead of taking crypto-Catholicism simply for granted, I would like to suggest that initially (i.e. in the first decades of the nineteenth century) it was primarily a church category which did not correspond with the ‘lived realities’ of those who received this label. It was designed to redefine the identity of people who had a vague or ambivalent sense of religious belonging, and to explicate and justify a church policy of Catholic recovery and expansion into Ottoman territory. Through the workings of the devotional and missionary regime in the parish of Letnica, however, the category became increasingly real for those involved.

This chapter can be seen as a short version of the monograph on Letnica that I had in mind before I started my fieldwork. I will pursue the lines I sketched out in my original research plans, and view Letnica’s Marian shrine and pilgrimage as a laboratory of identity, a place where identities change and are made contingent upon wider political developments. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the role religious regimes, particularly the Roman Catholic church and the Franciscan mission, have played in defining and (trans)forming local identities. Before I turn to the main events surrounding the martyrs of Stubla, I would first like to present a short history of the parish of Letnica in order to put events in a wider historical context.

**An historical survey of the parish of Letnica**

We do not know when the parish of Letnica, also called the parish of Cernagora or Montenegro di Scopia, was established. But there is no doubt that it has a long history, probably going back to the time of the Serbian kingdom (fourteenth century) or the initial period of Ottoman rule (fifteenth century).
century). At the height of their power, the Serbian kings allowed mining and trading colonies to be established by Dalmatian (Ragusan) traders and Saxon miners (Jireček 1990-I:269-271; see also Čirković 1997). This particularly happened in Kosovo, which was not only the heartland of the Serbian empire, but also was—and still is—an area rich in minerals. To exploit and market this natural wealth, of vital importance for the finances of the empire, the Serbian kings engaged specialists from abroad. Although elsewhere in Serbia Catholicism was suppressed, trading and mining centres such as Janjevo, Trepča, Prizren, Priština, and Novo Brdo, possessed flourishing Catholic parishes (Gjini 1986:79-85).

Letnica is not mentioned in medieval Serbian sources: probably it was of secondary importance, inferior to other mining centres both in terms of quality and quantity of mineral resources. Yet the name of the nearby village of Šašare (the largest settlement in the parish of Letnica) points at a former Saxon presence, and in addition the name Vrnavokolo is reminiscent of mining activities: kolo or ‘(mill) wheel’ was a common designation for water-mills processing the ore. When mining in Letnica collapsed many colonists probably left the area, leaving the poorest among them behind. It is likely that they changed in due time to subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. We know that Letnica possessed a church at the start of the sixteenth century, although it is unknown when it was built. During the seventeenth century Letnica is mentioned in the visitation reports of Catholic ecclesiastics who investigated Catholic church life in the areas that were now under Ottoman control. At that time, the parish possessed two churches, which were probably destroyed after the Austrian invasion of the Ottoman empire in 1690 failed and hostility and suspicion towards Christians increased considerably (Turk 1973:17; Urošević 1933:163; Malcolm 1998:163-166). There was no church for more than a century and a half (until 1866), and

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2 The main sources I used for my description of Letnica’s history are: Urošević 1933 & 1993, Turk 1973, and Gjini 1986.

3 Bogomir Stanković, the chronicler of partisan resistance in the area during World War Two, claims that other villages in the Karadag area were also settled by Saxons, mentioning Letnica, Šašare, Vrnavokolo, Vrnje and Stubla (1975:10).
according to local tradition masses were held in the open air, under an oak tree where the Black Madonna of Letnica was placed. The Croats from Letnica claim that the statue was crucial in helping to preserve the Catholic and Croat identity of their forefathers.

Although a locally based Marian cult may have existed before, the massive pilgrimage on Assumption Day probably developed only in the course of the nineteenth century, when an officially endorsed popular resurgence in Marian devotion emerged in the Catholic world at large (Pope 1985). In western Europe this phenomenon was part of a conservative Catholic reaction against the emergence of industrial society and modern political ideologies. In Ottoman territories the situation was different; here the revival of Marian devotion was meant to recover some of the church’s influence after a long period of Ottoman domination. It is not clear when the pilgrimage to Letnica started to gain larger dimensions, but we know that on Assumption Day 1872 the shrine was already attracting numerous pilgrims (Turk 1973:24,28). And in 1889 the Madonna of Letnica was crowned by the archbishop of Skopje with the approval of the Holy See (Urošević 1933:11). It is very likely, therefore, that the pilgrimage —as an organised religious event— started around 1866, when a new church was built and the Madonna statue was moved inside (Turk 1973:26). What was probably a popular devotion of only local dimensions was thus appropriated by an increasingly powerful clerical regime which slowly transformed it into a regional shrine. The Madonna has since then attracted a growing numbers of pilgrims: Catholics and Muslims as well as Orthodoxs; Croats and Albanians, as well as Gypsies and Serbs.

4 From the 1840s there were many Marian apparitions in France (La Salette 1846, Lourdes 1858) and elsewhere in Europe. Popes Pius IX (1846-1878) and Leo XIII (1878-1903) were both personally committed to the cult of the virgin Mary and approved coronations of Madonna statues. They also granted special indulgences for mass pilgrimages (Pope 1985:183).
The Martyrs of Stubla 1846-1848

Letnica is one of the few predominantly Slav parishes in the diocese of Skopje, where most Catholics are Albanian. Nevertheless, up to the beginning of the twentieth century the parish included several Catholic Albanian (and geographically also Muslim Albanian) settlements, among which Stubla and Binçë were the main ones. It was in and around these villages, and especially in Stubla’s hinterland (the Karadag area), that people could be found who were not really Catholics and not really Muslims, but a combination of both: the so-called laraman-s. During the nineteenth century they became the object of missionary activity by the Catholic (Franciscan) priests in Letnica. This is the main subject of this chapter.

If we go back to the middle of the nineteenth century, the period of our main concern here, it is important to keep in mind that the Muslim Albanians in villages adjacent to Letnica had undergone Islamicization quite recently, i.e. since the beginning of the eighteenth century, after they had moved from the northern Albanian highlands to Kosovo. The first Albanians came to the Gornja Morava district as Catholics but soon converted to Islam to secure their newly acquired properties and position of supremacy vis-à-vis the Serbian population (Urošević 1933:166-167). Yet they were only superficially Islamicized, and many of them continued to observe Catholic customs. According to present-day Albanian Catholic priests and church historians (cf. Gjini 1986; Gjergji-Gashi 1988), their conversion to Islam was only nominal, i.e. they adopted a Muslim name in order to escape Ottoman repression or avoid paying the Christian poll tax; usually only the men

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5 The term laraman is derived from the Albanian adjective i larmi which means variegated, motley, two-faced.

6 For Gornja Morava, the area in which Letnica and Stubla are located, this process has been described in great detail by the Serbian ethnographer Atanasije Urošević in his book Gornja Morava and Izmornik (Urošević 1993; originally published in 1935). Urošević also describes the Islamicization and gradual Albanianization of Serbs (and others) in the area.
converted since they had to pay taxes, while the women and children remained Catholics (Gjini 1986:141).

Most historians assume that the religious life of these Muslim converts continued to be essentially dualistic, split between two separate and radically opposed traditions, of which one was ‘fake’ and only fostered to present to the outside world, while the other was ‘genuine’ but secret. Gjergji-Gashi, an Albanian priest from Kosovo, who wrote a pseudo-historical and hagiographic account of the Martyrs of Stubla, thus tends to see crypto-Catholicism as a continuous phenomenon: these converts only took Muslim names, and for the rest they continued to celebrate important Christian feasts; they baptised their children, invited Catholic priests to their homes, attended church and did not go to the mosque (see for instance Gjergji-Gashi 1988:26). This image of an uninterrupted continuity of crypto-Catholic communities, which were simulating Muslim identity while retaining a largely uncorrupted but secret Catholic identity at home, has been produced and reproduced in church documents, and to some extent in scholarly texts as well (see for instance Skendi 1967; Bartl 1967; Malcolm 1997; Malcolm 1998:131-133). It is, however, questionable whether this image is accurate.

Gjergji-Gashi does not position his statements historically, yet it seems more likely to me that some (or perhaps most?) of these ‘crypto-Catholic’ practices were emerging only in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the Catholic church had established a more stable presence in the area. These practices had largely disappeared at an earlier stage. Until 1866, to mention only one element, attending church was practically impossible because there was no church in Letnica. Also, at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were hardly any priests in Kosovo to administer the sacraments. It is therefore more likely that crypto-Catholicism had become obsolete for most converts, a situation which only changed when the church started to ‘reinvent’ it and ‘retrieve’ it from memory. It was during the nineteenth century that, under the auspices of the church, the laraman population of the Karadag (re)emerged, with crypto-Catholics wishing to ‘reconvert’ to Catholicism. In short, I believe that crypto-Catholicism as a lived reality was historically and politically determined, much more than is reflected in church historiography.
The first conversion attempt of crypto-Catholics in the parish of Letnica occurred in 1837, but was violently suppressed by the local Ottoman governor who put the laramans in jail. While in custody they were tortured and circumcised, as the bishop of Prizren later reported to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome. After retracting their conversion to Catholicism they were released and sent back home in the company of Turkish policemen and Muslim priests (Gjini 1986:181; Gjergji-Gashi 1988:35-36). In 1845, prospects for conversion seemed to be more promising after laramans in other parts of Kosovo had been officially recognised as Roman Catholics (Malcolm 1998:186-187). In February of that year, the heads of twenty-five laraman families from the parish of Letnica went to Gjilan, the district capital, in order to persuade the kajmakam (Ottoman governor) and kadija (judge of the Sharia court) to grant them recognition as Catholics. The Ottoman governor refused and attempted to persuade the laramans to abandon the idea. According to Gjergji-Gashi’s romanticised narrative, he pointed to the advantages of being a Muslim, in particular the prerogatives Islam offers to men: polygamy and the possibility of separating from wives at any chosen time. When they insisted they were Catholics they were sent to jail in Skopje and Constantinople. After a few months they came back with an Ottoman ferman granting them recognition as Catholics, but after their return they were imprisoned again. The conservative Muslim elite in Kosovo feared that their shift to Catholicism would lead to conversions on a much wider scale, and in order to deter others they deported these twenty-five men and their families to Anatolia during the winter and spring of 1845-1846. Many of them died

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7 It is possible that this event is linked to the establishment of Austria’s protectorate over the Albanian Catholics in the Ottoman empire in the same year. Although the foundations for the Austrian Kultusprotektorat over parts of the Catholic population in the Ottoman empire were laid earlier (from the beginning of the seventeenth century), real Austrian influence on the position of the Catholics developed only during the nineteenth century; Austria started to send financial aid for the building of new churches and the maintenance or reconstruction of old churches, the building and maintenance of Catholic schools, etc. (Ippen 1902).

8 This happened for instance in Prizren, Peja and Gjakova. The Ottoman Grand Vizir granted them official recognition as Catholics (Gjini 1986:145-146; Gjergji-Gashi 1988:35).
during exile. Finally, in November 1848, after diplomatic intervention by the Great Powers, the survivors were brought back home by the Turkish government (Gjergji-Gashi 1988:34-48).

Gjergji-Gashi has made these crypto-Catholics into martyrs, who sacrificed their lives for the Catholic faith and the Albanian nation at the same time. But another contemporary account of the events, that of the nineteenth-century German historian Georg Rosen, is probably more accurate in stressing motives that are much more down to earth. According to his version, the attempted conversion needs to be seen in the light of strong Albanian resistance against the Tanzimat reforms, in particular against the introduction of the system of conscription into the Ottoman army. He makes clear that the deportation was instigated by conservative Muslim circles, who tried to obstruct these reforms and resented newly introduced religious freedoms. Rosen also notes that British, French and German diplomats provided help to the deportees, and tried to pressure the Ottoman government to stop their harsh treatment (Rosen 1866/II:93-98).

Gjergji-Gashi takes great pains to establish the exact number of deportees. He arrives at a total number of 166 persons, and when newborns born during the period of exile are included, the total number is 176. Not more than 79 persons returned. This means that almost one hundred died during their exile (Gjergji-Gashi 1988:51-52). Half of the twenty-five deported families were from Stubla, seven families were from Binçë, three from Vrnovskolo and two from Terzia (Karadag). To give some indication of the relative importance of these numbers: in 1882, the priest of Letnica, Nikola Mazarek, estimated that the total number of laraman families in the Karadag area was 400 at the time of these events (Gjergji-Gashi 1988:144). This means roughly 2,500 persons. The size of the Catholic population was considerably smaller: in 1846, the parish of Letnica counted only 766 Catholics divided over nine villages, laramans not included (Gjergji 1972:8).

Gjergji-Gashi’s account is based on a great number of original archival documents. He also uses manuscripts and letters written by priests and missionaries. Important sources are two chronicles, one written in 1882 by the local priest (Nicola Mazarek), who based his description on stories told by survivors, and the other by archbishop Dario Bucciarelli. Both have been reprinted in Gjergji-Gashi’s book in a Croatian translation. Gjergji-Gashi himself held interviews with old people in Stubla who had known the survivors personally (1988:5).
The Tanzimat reforms and the Franciscan offensive

As I see it, these events were indeed closely connected to the new conditions created by the Ottoman reforms which are commonly referred to as the Tanzimat or 'reordering' (1839-1876). The primary goal of these reforms was to save and revitalise the Ottoman empire by introducing European standards of organisation and administration. The empire was seriously threatened by administrative chaos, military weakness and the rise of national movements, particularly in the Balkan provinces. The reforms started with the imperial rescript of Gülhane (Rose Garden), which was a declaration of intent from the part of the Ottoman government, establishing security of life, honour, and property, introducing a fair and effective system of taxation, to create a regular army based and conscription, and to establish equality of all subjects irrespective of religious affiliation (Zürcher 1993:53). The introduction of equal rights for the Christian population was meant to bring to a halt the rise of nationalism, especially in the Balkans. In 1840, a revised penal code was introduced which recognised legal equality for Muslims and non-Muslims, and in 1844 the Porte abolished the death penalty for apostasy from Islam, a measure which particularly applied to recent Muslim converts who wished to return to their original (Christian) faith (Davison 1973:45). This did not bring an end to sanctions against apostasy—a murtat (‘one who turns back’) could be imprisoned or deported instead (Heffening 1993)— but it doubtlessly made conversion much less consequential.

Yet in practice, many of the reforms were half measures or total failures. They were undermined by many factors, one of which was the conservative opposition of the ulema and the majority of Ottoman officials. Also many ordinary Muslim believers resented the doctrine of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, seeing it as against the natural order of things (Davison 1973:43). This eventually led to fanatic outbursts of Muslims against Christians, especially in towns. The greatest problem was the lack of trained and reliable personnel to carry through these radical reforms. They often had to be executed by those very people whose abuses they were intended to stop. The reforms were particularly sabotaged in the provinces, as in Kosovo,
where they were not fully implemented even decades after they were introduced. Local notables refused to comply with measures that would inevitably bring an end to their almost absolute power and would introduce a high degree of state intervention from the Ottoman centre.

In the 1830s and 1840s there were numerous Albanian revolts against the reforms. It was especially the conscription system (*nizam*) which met with enormous resistance, as Albanians had been largely exempted from service in the Ottoman army. In Kosovo conscription was introduced in 1843, followed by large-scale uprisings when the Ottomans indeed started recruiting people (Malcolm 1998:185-186; Kaleshi & Kornrumpf 1967:179-181). Even though Christians were also required to serve in the army, they were soon offered the alternative of paying a special exemption tax which they usually preferred (Zürcher 1993:59). It is safe to assume, as Rosen (1866) did, that the conversion of laramans in Stubla was a local reaction against the introduction of the system of conscription; the same is certainly true for the groups of 'crypto-Catholics’ in areas around Gjakova and Peja who converted to Catholicism in 1845 (Gjini 1986:145; Malcolm 1998:186-187).

In 1856, the Tanzimat went into its second phase of reforms with a new imperial edict, the *Hatt-i Hümayun*. This edict was proclaimed under major western pressure (especially from France and Britain which had supported the Ottoman empire against Russia during the Crimean War) and laid particular stress on the equality of all peoples of the empire, specifying a number of ways in which this could be guaranteed (Davison 1973:3). The abolition of the death sentence for apostasy was reconfirmed (Davison 1973:55). As a result of this new edict, the situation for laramans and Catholics in Kosovo improved notably. After 1856, there were no further reports of serious abuses (Gjini 1986:184; Urošević 1933:168-169).

As the situation for Catholics improved, the Catholic Church saw new opportunities to do something about the enormous loss of influence it had suffered in the past. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Albanian Catholics had converted to Islam despite attempts by the

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11 The exemption tax replaced the much resented poll tax for Christians (*cizîye*) which had been abolished in accordance with the new Ottoman policy of religious equality.
church leaders and lower clergy to halt this process in some way or another. The response of the church had been quite ambivalent and contradictory: the higher clergy was usually much stricter than ordinary priests in its condemnation of individual converts. This became clear in 1703 when the first Concilium Albanicum (a meeting of Albanian bishops) strictly condemned conversion, especially if done out of opportunistic reasons (for instance to avoid the poll tax). It urged Christians not to adopt signs of Islamic identity (such as Muslim names) or in any other way to pretend to be ‘Turks’, and not to conceal their Catholic faith in front of Ottoman officials even in perilous situations (Stadtmüller 1956:73-74). It also explicitly regretted the fact that many Muslim converts still received the sacraments from Catholic priests, and it put the blame on the clergy’s ignorance. As far as baptism is concerned, the Council made clear that the baptising of children of ‘Turks’ was prohibited under all circumstances.¹²

While higher ecclesiastics favoured a principled approach, local priests and missionaries were much more pragmatic, trying to keep converts within the orbit of the church, and tolerating practices that were explicitly forbidden by their church leaders. In particular the Franciscans, who established missionary outposts in Ottoman territories, built up a reputation of tolerating popular customs that did not always correspond with the Church’s prescriptions.¹³ They continued to administer sacraments like baptism and matrimony to new converts in spite of the church’s ban. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Holy See and the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith were repeatedly forced to issue strict instructions to their priests how to proceed with these ‘crypto-Catholics’, and they usually did not allow the administering of

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¹² The baptizing of Muslims was quite a common practice among the Orthodox as well as the Roman Catholic priesthood, in Kosovo as well as Bosnia (Filipović 1951).

¹³ For the role of the Franciscans in Bosnia, and the traditional rivalry between them and the more recently established diocesan church structures, see Bax (1995).
sacraments to new converts. In addition, the church hierarchy tried to keep some control over the local priesthood by sending off regular visitation commissions (Radonić 1950).

None of these measures, however, were able to bring the process of Islamicization to a halt. At the start of the nineteenth century, the Catholic church in the Ottoman empire was in a deplorable state. In Kosovo, where the process of Islamicization was in full swing, the Catholic population was left almost without care of the church, and the bishop of Skopje sent pleas to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to do something about this situation (Gjergji-Gashi 1988:35). There were only six active parishes left in Kosovo (Prizren, Gjakova, Peja, Zym, Janjevo and Letnica) and the total number of Catholic believers was reduced to only 6,000.

In 1835, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome started to take measures to ‘rescue’ the laramans in the Skopje area, and Letnica was chosen as the centre of Franciscan missionary activity under direct supervision of the Congregation. In 1838, one year before the start of the Tanzimat reforms, the parish was assigned to Anton Maroevic, a Franciscan who as an Austro-Hungarian citizen—he was born on the Dalmatian island of Hvar—enjoyed some degree of immunity and protection. Taking advantage of the Tanzimat reforms, he tried to encourage the laramans to become Catholics. He not only had the support of his superiors, but he also enlisted the help of European diplomats in Constantinople: the case of the laramans had thus been ‘internationalised’ in order to make successful conversion possible (Gjini 1986:181).

14 Similar directives were issued in 1744 by pope Benedict XIV. According to Gjini’s account, further instructions were issued in 1762, 1768, 1840 and 1882 (1986:143-144).

15 Approximately one sixth were Slavs (in Letnica and Janjevo), the rest Albanians. See the statistics on the last (unnumbered) page of Gjergji-Gashi’s book (1988).

16 This is the purport of a document Gjergji-Gashi found in the Archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome (Gjergji-Gashi 1988:81, Document 117; see also p.26).

17 Urošević claims that in 1843 Maroević wrote a letter to the French ambassador in Istanbul to ask for his support in case the laramans in his parish were to convert to Catholicism (1933:167). In 1842, the Apostolic visitor and
Although events around the case of the Stubla martyrs showed that there were still some serious difficulties for (would-be) Catholics to overcome, the church strengthened its influence, especially through the Franciscan mission. The Franciscans intensified their attempts to win the souls of hundreds of laramans living in many small and remote villages in Stubla’s hinterland. Here I have attempted to reconstruct church policy towards the laramans in the period beginning from the 1840s, mainly on the basis of the research I did in the local church archives of the parish of Letnica. I discovered that the baptisms of laramans were registered meticulously by most of the Catholic priests who were active in Letnica and Stubla during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. I found several baptismal registers in which laraman baptisms were recorded, and I compiled a list of all baptisms of laraman new-borns (and some adults), usually identifiable from the added qualifications ‘(ex) occultis’, ‘(ex) parentibus occultis’, or ‘(ex) occultis conjugibus’ (the popular expression ‘laraman’ is rarely ever used in the church registers). In addition, from these registers I was also able to gather data on where these laramans were living and who the priests were who baptised them. First, I want to summarise my main findings, after which I will try to draw some more general conclusions from them.

Initially, priests included laraman baptisms in the regular baptismal registers, but afterwards, during a period of almost fifty years (1893-1940), they kept separate books for laramans administrator Ivan Topić called upon the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to “find a consular protector, whom you could send in these areas. (...) All Albanian crypto-Catholics would publicly and openly confess their national and religious affiliation, and their union with Christ’s faith” (Gjergji-Gashi 1988:28).

The Franciscan order came to Albania in the thirteenth century. During the Ottoman empire the order is said to have saved Catholicism in these parts from total extinction, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Skendi 1967:8). In the nineteenth century, the Franciscan mission in Albania gained momentum again under Austrian protection (Malaj 1990). The prominent role of the order in the attempts to revive Catholicism in these Ottoman areas is evident from the fact that in the crucial period between 1845 and 1888 the Franciscans provided as many as three archbishops in the archdiocese of Skopje.
(mostly referred to as *occulti*). Between 1842 and 1940, the total number of baptised laramans (almost exclusively new-borns) was between 1,700 and 1,800, the bulk of which (almost 95%) occurred in the years between 1872 and 1924. Before and after, the number of baptised laramans is small. It is remarkable that for the years of Anton Maroevic’s presence in Letnica as parish priest (1842–1856) I could find not one case of a laraman baptism, at least not in the register I saw. For the years between 1857 and 1865 I counted seven cases of baptism of crypto-Catholics, which indicates that the phenomenon of baptising laramans started gradually after the introduction of the Ottoman reforms of 1856. The year 1866 was truly exceptional with more than 25 baptisms in one year, which can be explained by the fact that in that year the church of Letnica was built. Another element that is likely to have played a part in this process is the fact that in 1865 the Ottoman government made an end to the tyrannical rule of the Gjinolli family in the districts of Gjilan and Prishtina (Maletić 1973:146,676). After 1872, the baptising of laramans became a normal phenomenon: the average number of laraman baptisms was over thirty per year, with numbers increasing in later years. In 1925, the number dropped again drastically to only six (from 47 cases in 1924), and in the following years, there were only a few cases.

Most priests also noted the matrimonial status of the parents of the baptised child. Roughly half of the baptised children between 1842 and 1940 were born in marriages that were not

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19 I found three registers which contain only baptismal records of laramans: one without a title, concerning the years 1893-1924 (including a few baptisms in 1940), Liber Baptizatorum Occultorum br.1 (for the years 1906-1915) and Liber Baptizatorum Occultorum br.2 (1920-1936). The first belonged to the parish of Letnica, and the second and third to the parish of Stubla, which was established as a separate parish in 1906. For the period before 1893, when baptisms of laramans were not registered separately, I found two registers in which baptisms of laramans were recorded: Libro dei Battezzati della Parrocchia di Zarnagora dall’Anno d’84-due (for the years 1842-1864) and Matična knjiga rodenih od 1866 do 1889 god. - Letnica (1866-1889).

20 We should bear in mind that at this stage the usual parochial tasks of parish priests, such as the administering of baptism and matrimony, were probably not the Franciscans’ main priority. They were much more engaged in trying to prepare the ground for that, i.e. to map the (crypto-)Catholic population of the area, to create an infrastructure, to build a church, etc.
consecrated by the church (‘ex illegitimis conjugibus’), with a preponderance of ‘illegitimate’ cases until the 1880s and 1890s. The villages that are mentioned most frequently in the records are (in order of importance) Dunav, Selište, Stubla, Sefer, Kureć, Stančić and Terzija. There was one Catholic priest who was particularly active in baptising crypto-Catholics: Don Michael Tarabulusi, who between 1893 and 1922 baptised almost 500 laramans, registering them separately (in a special register for only laramans). In 1897, he became administrator parochialis of Stubla and later, when the parish of Stubla was founded (1906), he was appointed its first parish priest. Also one archbishop contributed his mite when visiting the area: between 1880 and 1882, Fulgentius Carev (a Franciscan from Dalmatia) baptised a number of adults during the Holy Mass in Letnica in the presence of other Muslims. Apart from that, the archbishops of Skopje regularly inspected the baptismal registers and approved them with their signature. One of the most interesting elements of these registers is that priests often recorded two names for the baptised child (if it was of laraman background). Apart from the Catholic name, they also wrote down the Muslim name which was given to it by the parents and which would be the one used in public. So for boys, I found the following pairs of names which were quite often phonetically similar: Mark-Muharem, Simon-Osman, David-Tefik, Mark-Ali, Simon-Serifi, Zefi-Mehmeti. The majority of girls were baptised Mary, whereas their Muslim names varied: Amide, Baftia, Arifia, Kadisha, Zaide, Tahibe, Fata, Raba, Hajria etc. The church probably used the widespread veneration for Mary by laraman (and Muslim) women as its main leverage to incorporate these groups into the church, i.e. as one of the devices to (re-)Catholizice part of the Islamicized population in the Karadag mountains.

The attempts to bring ‘crypto-Catholics’ within the orbit of the church continued well into the twentieth century, especially after the Ottomans were swept away from the region in the first Balkan War. Kosovo became part of Serbia (1912), and was later incorporated in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918). After the first World War, the main role with regard to the laramans was reserved for bishop Ivan Franjo Gnidovec, a Lazarist from Slovenia who was bishop of Skopje from 1924 to 1939. He put most of his energies in recuperating the church after five centuries of Turkish rule, among other things by building new churches in places that did not have a
church before (Osvald 1989). He attempted to bring Catholics and laramans in isolated and remote places more in contact with organised church life, and Letnica became the main pilgrimage shrine in the diocese (Turk 1973:18). Between 1928 and 1934 he built a new church in Letnica. In the 1930s, he also built the church of St Anne in the small and remote village of Dunav, one of the main crypto-Catholic centres in the Karadag, in spite of opposition by local Muslim Albanians and the Serbian authorities in Gjilan (Sopi 1989:184). By creating a devotion to St Anne, the church probably hoped to reach the local laraman families through their mothers and grandmothers.21

Gnidovec also seems to have been behind the drastic fall in laraman baptisms after 1924, which I observed in the baptismal records. This development coincides with Gnidovec’s appointment as bishop of Skopje in November 1924, and it was possibly the result of a change in church policy introduced or implemented by him. I suggest that a possible explanation for this fall in laraman baptisms is not a mass conversion to Catholicism but rather the unwillingness of the bishop to tolerate these baptisms any further. After the end of Ottoman rule there was no need for laramans to conceal their Catholic identity, as he and other Catholic ecclesiastics might have thought. By drawing a tougher line, the laramans could probably be forced to abandon Islam and become Catholics once and for all. Indeed, only a few years later (in 1929), some laraman families converted to Catholicism, in Stubla, Terzija and some other villages in the Karadag (Sopi 1989:185; Turk 1992:149). These collective conversions continued into the 1930s. A considerable group of crypto-Catholics, however, did not convert because of traditional marital ties with Muslim clans, and also out of fear of their Muslim-dominated environment. I heard that in Stubla in these

21 St Anne is believed to be the mother of the virgin Mary and grandmother of Christ. As she gave birth to Mary at a very advanced age, after God answered her prayers to get pregnant, Anna is often invoked by women who want children. As the grandmother of Christ, she has been a symbol and example for grandmothers, especially in rural societies, where extended families are still dominant. Grandmothers usually manage household life and help their kin in cases of life crisis. The main domains of St Anna are thus procreation, matrimony and the household. She is the patroness of mothers, pregnant women and widows. In the second half of the nineteenth century there was a revival of the devotion of St Anne, parallel to the Marian revival (Brandenberg et al. 1992).
years, Catholics organised negotiations with laramans in order to facilitate their conversion to Catholicism. Since they feared repercussions from Muslim clans and deplored the loss of the bride price for their daughters, they demanded compensation. The inhabitants of Stubla are said to have collected money to pay the compensation, although this did not bring about the desired result. In addition it seems that the Yugoslav authorities were also obstructing the bishop’s attempts to bring about these conversions of laramans to Catholicism (Sopi 1989:182-183).

The failure to reconvert a large number of crypto-Catholics shows that their identity was perhaps less ‘Catholic’ than the church hoped. As I said in my introduction, their sense of identity was probably ambiguous and fragmented. Their memories of Catholic belonging were diffuse, and knowledge about religious prescriptions and obligations shallow. Therefore, I think that one should be cautious in assuming that these people were consciously aware of the fact that they were ‘combining’ two distinct faiths. Many ordinary believers probably did not perceive their religious life in terms of a split between two separate traditions, of which one was ‘false’ and for outside consumption while the other was secret and ‘genuine’. As Malcolm has noted, “with so many practices either shared or replicated between the faiths, these people probably did not notice such a dramatic difference in kind between all forms of Christianity on the one hand and Islam on the other” (Malcolm 1998:131).

If we bear this in mind I think that the notion of crypto-Catholicism should be treated with caution, at least for the nineteenth century. It seems likely that initially, when the church re-

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22 In his article on the parish of Letnica, Urošević mentions that there were still laramans in most villages of the Karadag, although it was impossible for him to establish their exact numbers (1933:167).

23 There is quite some ethnographic evidence to show that there was a great deal of overlap in Muslim and Catholic customs. Baptism was not only demanded by crypto-Catholics, real ‘Turks’ (Muslim Albanians) also quite commonly asked for it, particularly for male children (Filipović 1951:121). It is unclear whether Catholic priests drew a clear boundary between these two categories in accepting or refusing such a demand. Also the adoption of double names was not only typical of crypto-Catholics. Nopcsa notes that Muslim names were very popular among Catholics in Northern Albania, for instance among the Mirëtes (Nopcsa 1907:29). Also Filipović mentions that it was common for Catholic Albanians to adopt Muslim names as a protective measure against ‘evil’ (1951:125). See also Malcolm (1998:132).
established its presence in the area, crypto-Catholicism was more an idea propagated by the church than a genuinely popular phenomenon. Yet the fact that the church started to develop policies on the basis of its categorisations produced self-fulfilling prophesies: in the end, crypto-Catholicism became increasingly real in the minds of the people involved. As Malcolm has noted, the complicity of the priests was of crucial importance for the existence of crypto-Catholicism: “without the co-operation of the priests, crypto-Christianity could not function properly at all” (Malcolm 1997:11). This case shows, in more general terms, that it is not easy to disentangle the legacies of religious ‘mixing’, and that it is difficult to establish religious orthodoxy in peripheral and/or frontier situations (as it is already hard to achieve in homogeneous situations), especially if a solid ecclesiastic organisation is lacking. The belief systems of ordinary people at the intersections of different states and religious formations are often based on unconscious and unreflective fusion and borrowing. The centres of religious power have tried to overcome this situation: they have attempted to eradicate these elements of mixture and multiple religious ‘orientations’, and have pressed for clear-cut single identities, with various means, and mostly with limited success.

Epilogue

At the time when I was doing my fieldwork, I was told by Catholic priests that there were still laramans in the Karadag, in some remote places like the villages around Dunav. After half a century of almost complete silence, crypto-Catholicism became visible again, attracting renewed attention.

24 See Peyfuss (1992), who follows a similar argument. He stresses “the traditionally very low level of education (including religious education) of the rural population of the Balkans, including the clergy” (1992:132), as the main reason for widespread ignorance of religious doctrine and ritual practice.

25 Urošević provides us with one further interesting detail: on some post World War One Yugoslav maps the Karadag area is designated as Laraman, although the toponym is never used there. According to Urošević, it has been copied from older Austrian maps (Urošević 1933:167). The ethnographic as well as the geographic label apparently developed in conjunction; church and Austrian imperial policy coincided.
in Kosovo and beyond (see for instance Sabalić 1991). This interest, shared by Catholic and Muslims Albanians alike, had a clear political background related to questions of Albanian national identity: ‘Who are the Albanians?’ and ‘Where do we belong: the East or the West?’. When Kosovo’s autonomy was abolished (in 1989) and the Albanians started to organise their resistance, these questions were most acute, but the answer was formulated almost immediately: Albanians need to look to the West instead of the East for help and political support. As Shkëlzen Maliqi (a leading intellectual from Kosovo) wrote, at that time many Albanians were considering renouncing Islam in order to become Catholics, which they saw as the direction to take if Western sympathy were to be obtained: “During 1990, when the situation in Kosova deteriorated day by day, Muslim Albanians were openly reflecting on the idea of a collective conversion to Roman Catholicism. They asked themselves and friends around —some of this I heard myself— whether it was possible to return to the ‘faith of our ancestors’” (1997:119). Muslims even started to go en masse to Catholic services, especially during Christmas and other important holidays. Again crypto-Catholicism became a useful concept to think with and to do politics with, as it helped the Albanians to present themselves as an originally ‘Christian’ = ‘European’ nation in spite of their present-day Muslim appearance. Instead of causing religious troubles —as it had done in the middle of the nineteenth century— crypto-Catholicism now became a concept that united the Kosovo Albanians, making Islam and Christianity both part of their common identity.