HIDDEN BELIEVERS, HIDDEN APOSTATES: THE PHENOMENON OF CRYPTO-JEWS AND CRYPTO-CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

The term “crypto-religious” is meant to designate the status of people whose real religious views and practices are not in accordance with their official religious affiliation and who frequently may seek to hide this fact from the larger public. “Crypto-Jewish” and “crypto-Christian” groups have been observed in most different periods and regions of the Islamic world. They appeared in Egypt in the early 11th century (as a result of the wave of oppression by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim) and North West Africa in the 12th century. Cases of Crypto-Judaism were reported for the Yemen of the 12th century and Iran of the 17th and 19th centuries. In the Ottoman Empire, crypto-Christians were spotted on Cyprus and Crete, in Albania and Kosovo, Macedonia and North East Anatolia. We also hear of crypto-Christians in the Aegean island group of the Dodecanes, in Bulgaria and Bosnia. In the city of Bukhara in Central Asia crypto-Jews were to be found in the 18th and 19th centuries. One may also be familiar with the Jewish ‘Messias’ Sabbatai Zvi in the 17th century, whose crypto-Jewish followers still form today in Turkey the group of the so-called Sabbateans.

Crypto-religiosity is not reserved to the Islamic realm. By far the most notorious case of a crypto-religious group is located in the Spain after the Reconquista. Crypto-Jews (Marranos) and Crypto-Muslims (Moriscos) had converted under pressure to Christianity, but continued to practice their former religions in hiding. Nonetheless, attempts to conceal one’s true faith have been common within the Muslim community itself. The vast majority of Islamic states—as a prominent example we may mention the Ottoman Empire—were bound to the Sunni tradition.

1 See also the article by Marc Baer in this volume that is devoted to the prominent role of the Sabbateans in Salonica around 1900.

2 The word *sunna* which is the origin of the term “Sunnite” means the way the
Shia, the major opponent of the Sunna, allowed every Shiite to use the technique of pretense (taqiyya), i.e. a version of reservatio mentalis,³ as protection from persecution by the Sunni state, We might therefore talk here of ‘Crypto-Shiites’. My essay, however, will focus on the existence and representation of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in the Muslim Middle East.

The phenomenon of crypto-religious groups in the Middle East is not related either to a peculiar character of Islandom in its function as the predominant religion in a state or society,⁴ nor to Judaism and Christianity which are here cast into the role of a minority religion.⁵ We know that the Jews in the Islamic medieval world and the early modern age had mostly a better life than their fellow believers in Christian Europe.⁶ One should, however, resist the temptation to compare the status of crypto-religious groups in the Christian realm with that in the Muslim world and take it as a ‘proof’ of the moral superiority of either Islam or Christianity.⁷ For Christian Europe, there are at all events only a few

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⁷ See here for prominent voices amongst others Salo Wittmayer Baron, A Social and