

# Violence as Identity: Christians and Muslims in Hungary in the Medieval and Early Modern Period<sup>1</sup>

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Oh blessed, oh happy, oh strong warriors!  
Never will your admirable fame  
die, as long as the rapid waters flow.  
As long as the sun does not stop, as long as the Hungarian nation  
with sword protects the Christian faith  
your names will live...<sup>2</sup>

**W**ROTE MIKLÓS ZRÍNYI (NIKOLA ZRINSKI) IN THE MID SEVENTEENTH CENTURY about those who died fighting against the Ottomans. The poet, who himself was engaged in both politics and war, defined Hungarian identity as Christian and premised on warfare unto death against Muslims.

Both violence and identity are understandably topics of interest in today's world.<sup>3</sup> As Amartya Sen has eloquently argued, they are tied to each other not only in the rhetoric of those fomenting violence, but also by those analysts who invoke historically defined identity as an explanation for ethnic or religious conflict.<sup>4</sup> Here, I would like to reflect on the intersection and indeed interdependence of violence and identity in the formation of

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<sup>2</sup>*Obsidionis Sigetianae Libri XV*, usually known by the later title *Szigeti veszedelem* [*The Peril of Sziget*], was written between 1645–1648, bk. 9, vv. 77–78. László Körössy has published an English translation: Miklós Zrínyi, *The Siege of Sziget* (Washington, DC, 2011), here 148. I have modified and corrected Körössy's translation as necessary, based on Gróf Zrínyi Miklós, *Szigeti Veszedelem: Hösköltevény tizenöt énekben* [*The Peril of Sziget: Epic Poem in fifteen books*], annotated by Ákos Endrei (Budapest, 1901), 132.

<sup>3</sup>I use the term "identity" to designate constructed claims of group identification, claims that bounded groupness exists as an objective "thing" in the world (in this case, of Christians); based on the criticism of the term by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1–47.

<sup>4</sup>Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London, 2007), esp. 2–3, 42–44, 75–79.

Christian identity through interaction with Muslims in the medieval and early modern Kingdom of Hungary. I was honored with the opportunity to reflect on these issues at the Center for Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota. My choice of topic also pays homage to Robert A. Kann, who himself was interested in conflict and the development of tensions within the Habsburg Empire.

While violence and identity are certainly interdependent, they are, historically speaking, in a very different relationship to each other from what some current analysts assume about the historical past. Explanations for violence in our world often focus on the idea that identity develops first and violence follows from it, that enmity is only to be expected between “ethnic groups” that have evolved historically.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, others interpret violence as something fomented for political or economic gain, with its instigators making references to supposed identity as part of a strategy.<sup>6</sup> Amartya Sen’s recent work emphasizes the *illusion* of identity, manipulated and channeled into violence. Through the analysis of medieval and early modern texts, I would like to suggest that violence has had a foundational role in *creating and sustaining* identity for centuries, not just in the recent past.<sup>7</sup>

My talk spans three different moments in time, when Christians from the Kingdom of Hungary interacted with Muslims. The eleventh through thirteenth centuries, the so-called Árpád age, is the first moment. This was the formative period of the Christian kingdom, when a small Muslim minority lived within the Kingdom of Hungary, subject to the laws issued by kings and their synods. The second phase is the fifteenth century, during the period of the Ottoman wars but before the Ottoman conquest of parts of Hungary. The third and last period is the seventeenth century, during the era of the partial Ottoman conquest of Hungary and continued warfare against (but also alliances with) the Ottomans.

It may appear as if I were bringing together entirely different situations that cannot be compared to each other. In the early period, a tiny Muslim minority lived within the kingdom. They immigrated voluntarily, served the king as officials and soldiers, and were losing their traditions and knowledge of Islam. In the later Middle Ages and early modern period, the Ottoman Empire, ever increasing in strength and seemingly invincible, was steadily pushing through the Balkans and then into the Kingdom of Hungary, whose inhabitants were repeatedly engaged in warfare to protect their realm.

Naturally, many differences divide these periods from each other. The same is true about the sources I shall rely on. In the first case, I use legislation concerning a small dependent Muslim minority living within a Christian kingdom. In the second, I focus on the account of a Christian who was captured by the Ottomans and held as a slave for twenty years. And finally, my source is an epic poem, a literary homage to a man considered a hero, who died in the wars against the Ottomans, written by his great-grandson who was advocating the expulsion of the Ottomans from the Kingdom of Hungary. The authors of the texts all had ties to the Kingdom of Hungary, but while Christian identity is explicitly linked to the identity of the kingdom itself in the first and third cases, it is simply contrasted to that of the “Turks” in the second.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), esp. 141–42, 160–65.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, “The Enactment of ‘Tradition’: Albanian Constructions of Identity, Violence and Power in Times of Crisis,” in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, 97–120 (London and New York, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>On the contemporary identity-forming role of violence: Glenn Bowman, “The Violence in Identity,” in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, 25–46 (London and New York, 2001).

Yet there are also common themes. Charges in a variety of forms concern Muslims misleading Christians, by feigned conversion, feigned piety, or feigned friendship. At the same time, in all periods, expressions of Christian hostility coexisted with alliance with and reliance on Muslims in reality. There is also a connecting thread throughout these texts: In each we find a formulation of identity premised on violence against Muslims, although the nature of the violence diverges. Christian identity in all these texts is parasitic on anti-Islamic sentiment,<sup>8</sup> and its express conceptualization is intimately tied to actual or desired violence against Muslims.

Let me, then, proceed in a chronological order. In the recently Christianized kingdom of the Árpád dynasty, mixed royal and ecclesiastical legislation aimed at the conversion of Muslims living within the realm at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth centuries. The measures included in the legislation, intended to achieve the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, did not entail physical violence, but they were coercive and intrusive, aimed at breaking up Muslim communities. The first extant legislation, Canon 9 of the Synod of Szabolcs (1092) was particularly concerned with “merchants called Ishmaelites,” who after being baptized, “return to their own law through circumcision.”<sup>9</sup>

A few years later, at the very end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century, the legislation of King Kálmán (Coloman) aimed at the conversion of all Muslims; the laws were to prevent the persistence of Islamic practices. Denunciation was encouraged in order to identify those who adhered to Islamic fasting, abstention from pork, and ablution. Indeed, the law wanted to force Ishmaelites to eat pork when they had guests. Not only Muslim villages were to be broken up (each one building a church and then half the population moving to live with Christians), but also families themselves, with Ishmaelites having to marry their daughters to Christians.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for such intrusive and coercive policy is not explained, apart from the need to bring together the population in one religion, Christianity: “Let them henceforth reside together with us, in unanimity, in ... the one and same Church of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> It seems that Muslims in Hungary were targeted for conversion in the context of the realm’s Christianization, and the policy of integration through conversion then gained added impetus from the ideas that fueled the First Crusade. According to this legislation, the identity of Christians in the Kingdom of Hungary, defined as “our people” (“*gens nostra*”) not against non-Hungarians, but against Muslims (“their people,” “*gens sua*”) was only sustainable if there was unity within the realm.<sup>12</sup> Although physical violence played no role in creating community through the conversion of Muslims, coercion did, and the Christian identity of the realm was tied to the elimination of a particular group whose existence was suddenly seen as the only stumbling block on the way to unity.

<sup>8</sup>Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 89, 100–02, writes about anti-Western identity being parasitic on the West.

<sup>9</sup>János M. Bak, György Bónis, and James Ross Sweeney, eds. and trans., *The Laws of Hungary*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Laws of Medieval Hungary 1000–1301* (Bakersfield, CA, 1989), 57. The punishment was removal from their houses to other villages; provision was made to prove innocence from the charge through judicial process, probably by ordeal. I have analyzed in detail the situation of Muslims in Hungary in *At the Gate of Christendom: Jews, Muslims and “Pagans” in Medieval Hungary, c. 1000–c.1300* (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>The exact dating is uncertain; the synod took place between 1095–1104: Bak *et alii*, *Laws*, 90; 29, c. 46; 30, c. 49; 29, c. 47; 30, c. 48; Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*, 211–12, and my “‘The Villainous Deeds of Ishmaelites’: Muslim Rites in Christian Hungary,” forthcoming in *Ritus infidelium: Interconfessional Perspectives on Religious Practice in the Middle Ages*, ed. John Tolan and José Martínez Gázquez (Madrid).

<sup>11</sup>Bak *et alii*, *Laws*, 29, c. 47.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 30, c. 48.

Such a conceptualization of unity must be contextualized in contemporary ideas about the conversion of the kingdom. Medieval sources written in the realm presented this conversion as a process that started under Stephen (István) I in the early eleventh century; many of them emphasized its violent nature. The ecclesiastical author of the prologue to King Kálmán's legislation himself certainly described the conversion of the Hungarians as a violent process during the reign of Stephen I: "The whole kingdom was a slave to barbaric ignorance. The rough man, forcibly made a Christian, still kicked against the admonitory prod of the holy faith, still bit back at the penitential lashes of the switch of correction. It was therefore worthwhile to create the coercion of holy discipline, for the conversion of the faithful."<sup>13</sup> He then declared the conversion of Hungary's population a success by his own days: The rigor of earlier legislation could be relaxed, because people were now even willing to die for the faith.<sup>14</sup> Yet some contemporary legislation still condemned "pagan" practices, prohibiting offerings to trees or stones and found fault with the observance of Christian regulations.<sup>15</sup> Insisting on the existence of a firmly Christian realm, yet facing doubts about the Christianity of its inhabitants, the presence of Muslims now also became a problem: Canon law by that time regulated the status of subject Jews, who were to be set apart, but not that of Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

It seems therefore that in the absence of a fixed Muslim minority status, the king and his synodal legislators came up with the idea of integration through conversion as the only appropriate measure to ensure the Christian identity of the realm. The First Crusade and the ideas associated with it may also have influenced these policies: Pope Urban II turned Muslims both in the East (the Levant) and the West (the Iberian Peninsula) into the main enemies of Christians.<sup>17</sup> That may have had an impact on the treatment of Muslims in Hungary, contributing to the idea that Muslims could not remain, unconverted, in a Christian realm.

Not all Muslims converted, and by the mid twelfth century, the Hungarian ruler had a more positive attitude toward his Muslim subjects, even inviting further Muslim soldiers to immigrate. In the early thirteenth century, however, the Muslim minority became the target of another wave of pressure, this time from the papacy. Papal letters complained about the intermarriage of Muslims and Christians and about Muslims holding Christian slaves, using them as concubines, and forcibly converting them to Islam. The accusation of Muslim trickery also surfaced: According to the pope, Muslims married Christian women under the pretense of being Christians themselves and then forced the women to apostasize. These letters paint a picture of Muslims consciously misleading Christians by hiding their true identity initially.<sup>18</sup>

The information came to the pope from Hungarian prelates and was tied to local ecclesiastical attempts to get papal help against the king in order to secure ecclesiastical

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 24–26.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 55–67; Nora Berend, József Laszlovszky, and Béla Zsolt Szakács, "The Kingdom of Hungary," in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Central Europe, Scandinavia and Rus' c. 950–c. 1200*, ed. Nora Berend, 319–68 (Cambridge, 2007), at 333–35.

<sup>16</sup>James Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers and Infidels: The Church and the Non-Christian World 1250–1550* (Philadelphia, 1979), 3–6, 30; Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*, 212.

<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (Philadelphia, 1986), 13–30.

<sup>18</sup>Augustinus Theiner, *Vetera Monumenta Historica Hungarum Sacram Illustrantia*, vol. 1, 1216–1352 (Rome, 1859), 30, 60–61, 94, 114–15, nos. LVIII, LIX, CXXVII, CLXVIII, CXCV; analysis (including the charge of voluntary conversion to Islam) in Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*, 152–60.

privileges and to protect archiepiscopal interests, including revenues from the sale of salt and minting. The royal appointment of Muslims to positions overseeing minting and the sale of salt therefore came to be contested. The existence of converted “crypto”-Muslims may have provided the impetus for the charge of Muslim trickery, but the exaggeration of Muslim danger was a good means of getting the pope’s attention. According to these accusations, the Christian identity of the realm was under threat, and in order to save it, treacherous Muslims and insincere converts to Christianity had to be kept under firm control. All accusations against Muslims quickly disappeared from papal letters once the archbishop and prelates secured their interests in their contest with the king.

The theme of Muslim subterfuge also creates a connecting thread to the next period, the world of George of Hungary, the mid fifteenth century. George’s account of the customs of the Turks is framed by violence and premised on the idea of Muslim trickery. The identity of the author has been debated; we know about his life from the work itself.<sup>19</sup> Whether a Hungarian-speaker or a Saxon from Transylvania, George was born in the Kingdom of Hungary. In 1438, when George was about fifteen or sixteen years old, he was captured by the Ottomans at Sebes where he had gone to study.<sup>20</sup> Murad II and his troops besieged the city, which surrendered, but some of the defenders, including George, fled to a tower. The Ottomans put fire to the tower, and most of the people died a horrible death; the survivors, including George, were sold into slavery. He spent twenty years as a slave and finally concluded an agreement of liberation with his last master, who had befriended him. After he was freed, he returned to Christian Europe and became a Dominican. In 1481 he published in Rome the *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequitia Turcorum*.<sup>21</sup>

George paints an almost idyllic picture of the superiority of Muslim customs, only to accuse the Muslims of devilish trickery: The seeming perfection of their conduct is a ruse to mislead and drag Christians into damnation. He describes being sold into slavery and the failure of his attempts to escape. George writes about his doubts that arose after his eighth unsuccessful attempt to flee. He thought God had abandoned him: Otherwise, had his religion (Catholicism) pleased God, surely, God would have aided his escape. So he concluded that perhaps he should look for his salvation in the religion of his captors, the Turks. He started to acquaint himself with the faith of the Turks and learned their prayers and rites. He meditated on the spiritual meaning that Turks gave their rites, which—he says—in a way confirm and corroborate the faith of Christ. His text attests to a fascination with and perhaps conversion to Islam; George certainly had a good knowledge of dervishes and Islamic tenets. Modern scholars either suppose that he had converted and then subsequently tried to hide that fact, or that he shied away from conversion at the last minute.<sup>22</sup> George

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<sup>19</sup>J. A. B. Palmer, “Fr. Georgius de Hungaria, O.P., and the *Tractatus de moribus condicionibus et nequitia Turcorum*,” *Bulletin of The John Rylands Library* 34 (1951–1952): 44–68; Albrecht Classen, “The World of the Turks Described by an Eye-witness: Georgius de Hungaria’s Dialectical Discourse on the Foreign World of the Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 7, nos. 3–4 (2003): 257–79, at 264. Classen lists further bibliography on George.

<sup>20</sup>German Mühlbach, a town in Transylvania, then part of the Kingdom of Hungary, today in Romania; the Saxon settlement there is documented from the thirteenth century.

<sup>21</sup>Critical ed.: *Georgius de Hungaria, Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequitia Turcorum. Traktat über die Sitten, die Lebensverhältnisse und die Arglist der Türken*, ed. and trans. Reinhard Klockow (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna, 1993); *Schriften zur Landeskunde Siebenbürgens*, vol. 15.

<sup>22</sup>Michel Balivet, “La Peur du Turc,” in *Georges de Hongrie, Des Turcs. Traité sur les moeurs, les coutumes et la perfidie des Turcs*, 2nd ed., trans. Joël Schnapp, 207–20 (Toulouse, 2007), at 216, assumes he converted; Classen, “World of the Turks,” 264, argues that he did not.



himself claims that after six or seven months of learning about Muslim beliefs, he suddenly received divine help, turned away from the faith of the Turks, and retained, firmly, his Catholicism for the next fifteen years until his liberation.<sup>23</sup>

He claims to be writing to strengthen the faith of other Christians in Ottoman captivity, although the text is much more a mixture of self-justification and an exhortation to Christians in the face of growing Ottoman success. George strives to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to Christians in Europe, where, because of Ottoman military victories, many may well have started to wonder about the superiority of Islam.<sup>24</sup> We should not forget that George was writing at a time when the Ottomans were advancing, signaled by their victories in 1396 at Nicopolis, in 1444 at Varna, in 1448 at the second battle of Kosovo (against Hungarian and Wallachian troops), and in 1453 by the fall of Constantinople. Ottoman attacks started against Italy in 1480 and only stopped because of Mehmet II's death in May 1481.<sup>25</sup> George is aware of, and explicitly mentions, the conversion to Islam of Christians in the conquered Balkan areas.

George is full of admiration for the behavior and customs of the Ottomans. He lists the many virtues of the Turks. For example, they dress modestly and wear nothing indecent; their gestures and decent behavior are to be praised; they have nothing useless or superfluous; they live as if they had taken monastic vows. The leaders themselves live in simplicity; even the "king" (sultan) sits like the others on the floor at prayers in "church" (mosque) and not on a royal throne. Their moral purity is exemplary, as are their great care for bodily purity and cleanliness and ablutions before prayer. They detest luxury and extravagance. Indeed, they live the way Christians *should* live; in fact they criticize Christians who care about worldly luxury as if they would live forever. They also detest images and criticize Christians for idolatry; and the decency of their women contrasts with the indecency of Christian women. Ottoman customs, then, are portrayed by George as those of a perfect society and are even held up as an example to Christians.<sup>26</sup>

Nor is this admiration confined to social customs alone. George also displays a detailed knowledge of Islamic tenets and offers a thorough description of the rules of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. Throughout, he is very positive about these, only to draw the conclusion that disgust and shame prevent him from giving more details.<sup>27</sup> Even the monotheism of the Turks that could be recognized as a commonality is presented as a trick: If the Turks can convince people that they venerate one God, they can the more easily diffuse their venom under the cover of piety, a trap for the perdition of souls, because people's doubts disappear.<sup>28</sup> George also describes the way in which Ottoman dervishes endure fasting, poverty, and silence, keep chaste, do not feel pain, experience supernatural ecstasy through dancing, and produce miracles after death. He saw such a dervish and could not but admire him; "men like that resemble angels more than men."<sup>29</sup> Yet, in the end, George concludes that dervishes produce what look like miracles in order to mislead even more, to make believe that the devil's work is God's. Just as the virtues are false, so are the miracles.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, 300, 302.

<sup>24</sup>On earlier Christian strategies against Muslim conquerors in the face of Christian conversions to Islam, see John Toland, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York, 2002).

<sup>25</sup>Norman Housely's many works analyze the wars against the Ottomans, for example *The Later Crusades, 1274–1580: From Lyons to Alcazar* (Oxford, 1992), and *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400–1536* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>26</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, 222, 224.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 254–68; 270.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 274, 282.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 284–86, 306–14, 352, 360–68 and 272, respectively.

For that is George's main point: For all their apparent superiority, the Muslims are allied with the devil. They mislead and do violence to Christians. George's concept of violence is very different from ours. What we would define as religious tolerance is the supreme violence for him. He does talk about the ability of the Turks to fight, their pride as warriors, and their continuous victories against Christians. But he insists much more on the violent nature of what we would see as nonviolence. To hear about the Turks' warfare is terrifying, but it is even more terrifying to see: They take men by surprise, without the effusion of blood, without massacre, and "keep alive physically those they plan to kill spiritually."<sup>31</sup> Under the pretext of piety, Turks do not kill captured Christians but take them as slaves. They use good habits to mislead the faithful and have great success converting Christians to their own faith, even though they do not use force in order to hasten conversion.<sup>32</sup> All this is an elaborate diabolic trick to "kill the soul" and "bury it in the still living body"; he compares the effect to that of a putrefying body that contaminates others as other Christians are dragged into converting to Islam.<sup>33</sup> "This ... sect uproots, not by violence, but through long habit, the desire for liberty, and blinds the reason of man, so that he is constrained to reject the faith for which he had been ready to die.... Who could escape from this malignant power?... Its power is such, that it penetrates the profoundest part of the heart and doesn't leave it before infecting the most intimate part of the soul."<sup>34</sup>

For George, Ottoman policy is much worse than physical violence. The very piety of the Turks is a sign of their malign nature; the very tolerance of the Ottomans is violence against the souls of the faithful. The real battle is on a spiritual level. In some respects, George's text is stereotypical. He resorts to a distinctive medieval Christian eschatological explanation for Muslim success: The Turks are servants of the Antichrist, and an imminent Apocalypse looms, when the true faithful will gain their reward from God. He also uses another common framework: highlighting the positive behavior of the Turks to criticize Christian society and hold up a mirror on proper behavior. Yet what I want to focus on here is a more unusual aspect of the text: the way in which identity and violence are interrelated.

George's open admiration of Islam and the Ottomans is channeled into violent rhetoric against Muslims. George frames his whole account by reference to violence. His narrative emphasizes that he had been ready to die for his Christian faith, but then in captivity was so contaminated by the poison of the Turks' heresy that he started to doubt seriously his Christian faith; almost apostasized, but divine providence saved him; so he writes to help protect Christians against the malice of the Turks. The Turks are the Beast of the Apocalypse, the enemy of Christ. "How could a Christian live among the Turks, when a supernatural, even spiritual, hostility opposes them?" He also asserts that it is impossible for a Turk to adopt the faith of Christ.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, even within the religious framework George uses, it is impossible to bridge the gap; enmity between Christians and Muslims is presented as unavoidable.

George of Hungary fled to a communal Christian identity. He understood this communal identity as not only principal or dominant, but indeed as foundational: Religious identity is

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 192, "uiuos possint conseruare corporaliter, quos spiritualiter intendunt occidere." While the allotted length does not leave room for lengthy citations from the original, I provide a few key phrases from George's text in Latin.

<sup>32</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, 244.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 174, "...inhumanus autem, imo diabolicus est animam occidere et ad inficiendum alios suo fetore quasi cadauer putridum eam in corpore uiuo sepelire." The idea of killing the soul draws on Matthew 10: 28.

<sup>34</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, 174, 176.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 146, 170, 172, 176, 372, respectively.

linked to the question of salvation and damnation, and it excludes any possibility of a personal choice. The question of identity is posed starkly here, and George's views fit in quite well with those criticized by Amartya Sen, who, however, focuses exclusively on the contemporary period. Sen argues that it is reductionist to classify people according to their religion alone. A mistake to see human beings in terms of only one affiliation, when in reality Islamic identity, for example, would be only one of the characteristics that a person regards as important about themselves. "Religion is not, and cannot be, a person's all-encompassing identity"; if we interact as human beings, we see our similarities, and our varied differences, which are not so conducive to violence and confrontation.<sup>36</sup>

George, however, could not disagree more strongly; he *chooses* Christian identity linked to violence. This is not based on ignorance, far from it: George interacted for twenty years with Muslims, came to know them intimately, and did not simply see similarities, but indeed many admirable characteristics in Muslims. Then he drew the conclusion that similarities and admirable qualities should be ignored; what counted was whether one was a Christian or a Muslim. George chose what Sen calls a reductionist view<sup>37</sup> and preferred the crude stereotype to his own very sophisticated personal understanding of Muslims. The Turks poison Christians with their impiety, attack not the body but the soul, the good treatment of prisoners by Turks is a ruse to bring them to apostasy.<sup>38</sup> He posits a Christian versus Muslim identity, from which everything follows. Against Sen's view of multiple identities, George chooses to see his Christian identity as the only identity he has, rejecting all other real and possible affiliations.

While Sen argues that people who are all Muslims nonetheless differ in political and social values, economic and literary pursuits, professional and philosophical involvements, attitudes, and lifestyle and "one's religious faith does not in itself resolve all the decisions we have to make in our lives,"<sup>39</sup> George takes a diametrically opposite view. He posits that the confrontation is ultimately one between God (with the Christians) and the Devil (with the Turks) who fight against each other.<sup>40</sup> For him, being a Muslim or a Christian then automatically defines everything a person has to believe in and the way he has to act.

The modern politicization of religion and the way in which terrorists extend the role of religion very far into other spheres have been criticized.<sup>41</sup> Although this terminology would have made no sense to George or his contemporaries, the "politicization of religion" is not a modern phenomenon. It is, rather, the starting point from which Western society has increasingly divorced itself, although the divorce is very much contested these days. For George, all moral and political judgments had to follow from "religion," which however he conceptualized as the truth. Sen argues that it is neither possible nor necessary to define a "true Muslim" in terms of political and social beliefs, or in terms of beliefs about confrontation and tolerance, on which Islam does not dictate.<sup>42</sup> George takes a diametrically opposite view, and of course also conceives of "true Christians" in the same way.

Observers of contemporary wars (such as the disintegration of Yugoslavia) have naturally questioned why people can so easily turn those they know well into enemies and become

<sup>36</sup>Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 60–61; quotation at 83.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>38</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, 144, 146.

<sup>39</sup>Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 61; quotation at 67.

<sup>40</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, 330.

<sup>41</sup>Bassam Tibi, "The Politicization of Islam into Islamism in the Context of Global Religious Fundamentalism," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, no. 2 (2010): 153–70; Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 71, 83.

<sup>42</sup>Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 77, 81–82.



killers. It is clear why political impresarios who cultivate violence arise, because of the advantages of power they gain. Yet what triggers the turn against recent friends at the level of the many who participate in such violence against neighbors? Why is violence that is linked to definitions of identity attractive to ordinary people? Explanations based on competition for resources, disaffection because of poverty, or past grievances fail to address that question completely.<sup>43</sup>

We can perhaps draw broader conclusions, applicable to other cases as well, from George's text. Against such a claim, one could argue that George is just one individual, and it is impossible to draw more general conclusions on the appeal of his views. The broad diffusion of his work, however, attests to the popularity of his ideas among his contemporaries: Within one year of publication (in Rome), it was reprinted in Swabia (Urach) and until 1550, reprints followed in Cologne, Paris, Wittenberg, Nuremberg, and Basel; in addition, partial translations and excerpts of it were in circulation. In 1530, the German translation of the full text was accompanied by Luther's preface. Many other authors writing about the Turks made use of the work.<sup>44</sup>

George was not a political leader, nor did he try to combat economic deprivation. Yet he embraced a monolithic definition of identity that fomented enmity between groups defined by their religious adhesion. George had experienced fluidity: He saw how easily he would have been able to become a Muslim, "a Turk." Perhaps he even did become one. Their similarities to Christians and admirable qualities led to George's anxiety about losing his sense of self, becoming indistinguishable from the "Turks," who, according to all he knew, should have been very different from him. He had been ready to give his life fighting against them. He had been taught that they were the enemy. How could they then be so similar? The very fluidity of possible identification, the possibility of becoming a "Turk," the similarities between people who should be different (after all, according to monotheistic claims, only one God can be the real one, only one religion the truth) produced anxiety and the turn to rigid categorization, the rejection of possible merits in Islam, the dismissal of everything positive as a ruse meant to mislead and ultimately to lead into hell. George needed hard boundaries to create an identity that would be a source of confidence, pride, and, even more basically, a sense of self.

Scholars have by now spent considerable energy on demonstrating that identity is constructed, fluid, changeable, and not a monolithic, preexisting "thing" that people or communities possess. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have rightly pointed out that the attempt to use a term that expresses unchanging, rigid continuity as a category for analyzing change and fluidity is counterproductive because it continues to suggest that "'groupness' [is]... always already there in some form."<sup>45</sup> There will never be a meeting of minds between scholars studying the formation, changing and constructed nature, and fluidity of identification, and those who *use* identity, especially in order to mobilize for a cause (be that religious, national, or ethnic). The attraction of appealing to an identity is that it can provide a rigid external frame to hang onto for those who find fluidity frightening and

<sup>43</sup>References to ethnic hatred certainly do not explain such events, see, e.g., Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); V. P. Gagnon Jr., *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca, 2004).

<sup>44</sup>Klockow, *Georgius de Hungaria*, chap. IV, "Rezeption," 52–60; *Chronica unnd Beschreibung der Türckey. Mit eyner Vorrhed D. Martini Lutheri*, introduction by Carl Göllner (Cologne/Vienna, 1983), Schriften zur Landeskunde Siebenbürgens, vol. 6 (reprint of 1530 Nuremberg ed.).

<sup>45</sup>Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 28. They propose a range of other terms (such as "identification"), to replace "identity" as a scholarly term.

cannot find a sense of self without a rock-hard, unchanging, and unchangeable “natural” and external “truth” (be that religious, national, or ethnic).

Fluidity and the need to define boundaries bring me to my third text, the Hungarian epic poem usually known as *The Peril of Sziget*, written between 1645–1648 by Count Miklós Zrínyi or Nikola Zrinski (1620–64).<sup>46</sup> It celebrated Count Zrínyi’s namesake, his great-grandfather Miklós Zrínyi (1508–66), *banus* (governor or viceroy) of Croatia, who had defended the fort of Sziget in southern Hungary against the Ottoman troops of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1566. Zrínyi and his remaining men all died in the last battle.

The poet depicted the siege and his great-grandfather’s self-sacrifice as part of salvation history. The poem opens with the description of a vengeful God, intent on punishing the Hungarians for their sinfulness (described in terms of contravening the Ten Commandments, committing all the sins from idolatry through theft and murder to adultery). Yet by the end, God is propitiated by the self-sacrifice of Zrínyi and sends an angelic legion to carry the souls of the Christian dead to heaven. The poem’s main plot relates to warfare between the Christian troops and the Ottoman ones and includes long sections of praise for individual prowess in battle; a sub-plot narrates a love story between a warrior in the Ottoman camp, Deliman, and the Sultan’s daughter. Following Homer and Virgil, the poet freely mixes fables and inventions with history; as he himself mentions in his introduction, he trusts in his readers’ ability to distinguish between them.<sup>47</sup>

The poem contains the most explicit accounts of violence among the texts I have used. These depict physical violence in battle with great relish. For example, one warrior cuts a Turk in two at the waist, splits another one’s head in two, and kills a third by driving his sword into his chest; Zrínyi wades through “a lake of blood” and opens “waterfalls of blood in the pagans.”<sup>48</sup>

The conflict is also unambiguously presented in religious terms. Although the term “Hungarian nation” (“*magyar nemzet*”) in the quotation at the beginning of this paper may sound deceptively modern, Zrínyi’s world was far from that of modern nationalism. The family was multilingual and used both the Hungarian and Croatian forms of the family name (Zrínyi, or in an older version Zrini, and Zrinski). The poet himself was born in a mixed Croatian and Hungarian family and celebrated both Hungarian and Croat heroes as members of the “nation” in the epic poem. Rather, the dividing line runs between Christians and Muslims. Negative stereotyping in the vocabulary is pervasive: The Ottomans are called “pagans,” “infidel dogs,” and “sly Saracens.”<sup>49</sup> The reader is explicitly told many times that the Christians possess the truth and fight for God, and the Muslims are in league with the devil and with the forces of hell. The Christian dead are martyrs who gain immediate entry to heaven.<sup>50</sup> The angel Gabriel in a direct speech to Zrínyi informs him that he is the “beloved servant of the lord of hosts,” “brave flower of Christendom,” “Jesus’ sanctified lieutenant.”<sup>51</sup> The poet emphasizes the different destinations of the dead. Dead Christians

<sup>46</sup>Recent work with additional bibliography on the author and his great-grandfather: Ágnes R. Várkonyi, *Európa Zrínyije: Válogatott Tanulmányok [Europe’s Zrínyi: Selected Articles]* (Budapest, 2010); Wilhelm Kühlmann and Gábor Tüskés, eds., *Militia et Litterae: Die beiden Nikolaus Zrínyi und Europa* (Tübingen, 2009).

<sup>47</sup>Prologue: Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 27; Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 3.

<sup>48</sup>Bk. 13, vv. 25–26, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 174, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 205–06; Bk. 15, v. 77, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 203, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 247.

<sup>49</sup>E.g., Bk. 1, v. 6, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 28, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 7; Bk. 2, v. 72, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 48, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 34; Bk. 6, v. 86, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 96, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 100.

<sup>50</sup>E.g., Bk. 4, vv. 32–33, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 68–69, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 60; Bk. 7, v. 48, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 106, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 112.

<sup>51</sup>Bk. 15, v. 41, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 199, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 241–42.





Yet throughout, there is recognition of Ottoman courage, individual prowess in battle, and bravery. Individual Turks are often called valiant and brave. Zrínyi himself saves an Ottoman warrior he admires for his great prowess.<sup>54</sup> The poet also expresses high regard for the leader of the Ottoman army, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent:

Though Sultan Suleiman was our enemy,  
 Apart from his faith that was pagan,  
 Perhaps never was there such a lord amongst the Turks.

And I can confidently say, without any “perhaps,”  
 Amongst pagans there never was upon this earth  
 A man so brave and wise, who in so many wars  
 Was victorious, and over many countries.

Valor and intelligence were equally present in him,  
 Prowess in battle was great within him,  
 Had cruelty not made a mark upon his heart,  
 Maybe even amongst Christians he would have been the greatest.<sup>55</sup>

The celebration of the military valor of one’s enemies naturally raises the status of the heroes on one’s own side. Paradoxically, therefore, violence and respect toward the enemy are not irreconcilable in this perspective. Indeed, valiant enemies serve the purpose of creating a Christian identity founded on anti-Muslim warfare even better. Zrínyi, similarly to George, portrays an unresolvable conflict between Christians, fighting for the true God, and Muslims, allies of the devil and evil spirits from Hell, although he portrays it unrelentingly in military terms, whereas George was writing mostly about a spiritual struggle. Nonetheless, this representation is just as divorced from the complexity of real interaction (although warfare was certainly a reality) as George’s text.

The representation of ultimately unbridgeable hostility did not even stand up to scrutiny in the poet Zrínyi’s own family. In 1671, Zrínyi’s brother Petar (Peter), who had become *banus* of Croatia after Miklós’s death in 1664 and who had translated into Croatian the *Siege of Sziget*, was executed because he was a leading member of the Wesselényi conspiracy, offering an alliance to the Ottomans against Leopold I Habsburg.<sup>56</sup>

In all the cases I talked about, identity was tied to violence in various forms: the forcible disruption of Muslim communities, violent rhetoric, the advocacy of violence against the Ottomans, and of the impossibility of any peaceful dealings with them; and the glorification of physical violence in warfare as bringing salvation. Christian identity in these cases was created or strengthened through violence; violence was a necessary ingredient of identity, foundational for self-definition. It became the content of identity. In every case, the complexity of reality was willfully ignored. In the earlier period, Muslims had served the kings of Hungary in various capacities from merchants to soldiers; George experienced

<sup>54</sup>Bk. 3, vv. 105–06 (example of bravery), 112–13 (Zrínyi saving a Turk), Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 62, 63, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 53, 54.

<sup>55</sup>Bk. 2, vv. 44–46, Zrínyi, *Szigeti Veszedelem*, 46, Zrínyi, *Siege of Sziget*, 30.

<sup>56</sup>Ágnes W. Salgó, *A Wesselényi összeesküvés. Beszámoló a perről és a kivégzésekről* [*The Wesselényi conspiracy. An account of the trial and executions*] (Budapest, 2005).

personally many admirable aspects of Ottoman life; Hungarian nobles in the seventeenth century turned to the Sultan to ask for an alliance against the Habsburgs, as they had done already in the sixteenth century.<sup>57</sup> Yet in the schematic representations, Muslims are turned into an enemy or even the Beast of the Apocalypse. They mislead and lead into damnation. There is no possible bridge to span the gap between them and Christians.<sup>58</sup>

Why, if reality encompassed a whole range of relationships between Christians and Muslims, was it possible and indeed attractive, to make enmity and violence against Muslims the basis of one's own Christian identity? Amartya Sen writes "violence of identity [is]...hard to grasp"; sectarian violence is crude, reductionist, and turns multidimensional human beings into one-dimensional creatures.<sup>59</sup> I would suggest herein lies its power. It is the generative aspect of violence that makes it attractive in the creation of identity. However uncomfortable it is to face this, a crucial aspect of violence is what the perpetrator derives from it. As highlighted by some recent anthropological work, the establishment of boundaries and differentiation that engenders identity is important among such gains; in the cases examined here, the definition of borders through advocating violence shaped identity.<sup>60</sup> From the perspective of the Christian authors I have analyzed here, solid Christian identity was to be secured by violent confrontation with Muslims, be it forced integration as converts or elimination through physical violence. Any moral human being will shrink from deliberating this side of violence; it is profoundly disturbing, yet if we turn away from it, we will not understand a major motivational force in history.

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<sup>57</sup>Pál Fodor, *Magyarország és a török hódítás [Hungary and the Ottoman conquest]* (Budapest, 1991).

<sup>58</sup>None of the texts analyzed here envisions the possibility of good relations between Muslims as Muslims and Christians, but their stance on the conversion of Muslims to Christianity differed; conversion was a possible route to transformation from Muslim to Christian in the early period (although it subsequently raised doubts about the "sincerity" of converts) and for Zrínyi, one of whose characters is a converted Muslim woman who became a good Christian. The possibility of such transformation was denied by George.

<sup>59</sup>Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 173–74.

<sup>60</sup>Bowman, "The Violence in Identity," 28, 38.