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Mary Jane Maxwell

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Afanasii Nikitin: An Orthodox Russian's Spiritual Voyage in the *Dar al-Islam,* 1468–1475*

MARY JANE MAXWELL
The Pennsylvania State University

Russian merchant Afanasii Nikitin offered the following advice to fellow Russian traders: "And so, my Christian brothers of Rus', those of you who want to go to the land of India must leave their faith in Rus' and invoke Muhammed before setting out to the land of Hindustan."[1] Nikitin departed from Tver', Russia, in 1468 in hopes of trading furs in the north Caspian region. He traveled as part of a group of private Tver' merchants who regularly ventured along established trade

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[1] *Khozhenie za tri moria Afanasia Nikitinia 1466–1472* (Moscow: Geographgez, 1960), p. 111. Quotations from Nikitin's *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* in this article will refer to the Russian and English translations in the 1960 publication, hereafter referred to as *Khozhdenie* [Voyage]. This publication used the 1958 translation prepared by K. N. Serbina in the Soviet academic series Literary Monuments. The provenance of *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* is complex. The original text, sadly, has not been preserved. In short, Nikitin's notes were discovered by N. M. Karamzin in 1817 in the archives of the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery. Scholars began to refer to his account as "Voyage Beyond Three Seas" and later discovered other variants in different chronicles from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Karamzin introduced Nikitin to Russians in 1821 in volume VI of his *History of the Russian State.* Later, I. P. Sakharov published the account in his *Tales of the Russian People* in 1849 (using both the Sofia II and Trinity versions). Variants, including the Sofia II chronicle, Undolskii collection, and the Lvov chronicle, were published in editions of the Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles, vol. 6 (1853) and vol. 20 (1910). K. N. Serbina presented the first separate edition of *Voyage* in 1948 in Literary Monuments. Serbina used several variants

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routes.[2] Near Astrakhan, however, his party unfortunately fell prey to a Tatar attack, and Nikitin lost all his goods. Shortly thereafter Nikitin made the decision to venture through Persia and then on to India in hopes of recouping his losses.[3] On his return to Russia in 1475, Nikitin died near Smolensk before reaching home. Although nothing is known about Nikitin's life before his journey, Nikitin is remarkable because he kept an account of his expedition in a text subsequently titled *Voyage Beyond Three Seas.* This account occupies a unique place in Russian historical and literary studies because it was quite unusual for a Russian merchant to travel the distance Nikitin traveled and even more extraordinary for a merchant to document his journey. Furthermore, Nikitin recorded his personal thoughts and feelings, offering scholars a glimpse into heart and mind of a common medieval Russian.

The historicity of Nikitin's account has not been questioned, and *Voyage* remains an integral part of both Russian and Indian historiography.[4] Even though Nikitin's original notes have been lost, Russian scribes preserved his account in several texts and chronicles (or annals), which contained a variety of historical events as well as heroic deeds

(however, she considered the Trinity text the fullest of the texts), and Literary Monuments published the second edition (with more corrections) in 1958. This translation appeared in the beautifully illustrated book *Khozhdenie* as Russia was promoting its "friendship of the peoples" idea as well as conducting Soviet-Indian trade agreements. As a consequence, *Voyage* appears in four languages—Old Russian, Russian, Hindi, and English—and it also includes a copy of the Trinity text. I will use the English translations whenever possible, but will also make use of several passages expunged by Soviet translators. I use the 1960 translation because it is accessible to interested English readers who would like to incorporate *Voyage* into their research or in the classroom. However, in other instances, I will also rely on the more scholarly translation of *Voyage* made by L. S. Semenov in Ia. S. Lur'e and L. S. Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria Afanasia Nikitina* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1986), pp. 43–58. Lur'e also comments in detail on the preparation of Geography's 1960 edition in "Arkheograficheskii Obzor" in Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* pp. 109–110. For a critique on Soviet translations, see Lowell R. Tillet, "Afanasii Nikitin as a Cultural Ambassador to India: A Bowdlerized Soviet Translation of His Journal," *Russian Review* 25, no. 2 (1966): 160–169.

[2] On Russian merchants, see Janet Martin, "Muscovite Travelling Merchants: The Trade with the Muslim East (15th and 16th Centuries)," *Central Asian Survey* 4, no. 3 (1985): 21–38.

[3] Scholars differ in their assessment of Nikitin's decision to travel on to Persia and eventually India. See Ia. S. Lur'e in Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* pp. 71–72; and Gail Lenhoff and Janet Martin, "The Commercial and Cultural Context of Afanasij Nikitin's Journey Beyond Three Seas," *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas* 37 (1989): 322.

[4] "There is nothing in the text of *Voyage* that gives reason to doubt that the notes are original, written by a Tver' merchant during his journey to India" (Lur'e, "Russkii 'Chuzhezemets' v Indii XV Veka" in Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* pp. 69–70); Semenov, "Khronologiia Puteshestviya Afanasia Nikitinia" in Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 95; and John Keay, *A History of India* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), p. 284.

and legends throughout medieval Russian history.[5] Most likely, Nikitin began writing his notes in India following a two-year stay in Persia. He finished writing his account in Kaffa on the Black Sea before he died.[6] His fellow merchants carried back his original notes to Moscow and turned them over to the clerk of Tsar Ivan III in 1475. *Voyage* then found its way into several Russian chronicles during the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. Nikitin's notes were discovered by the Russian historian N. M. Karamzin in 1817 in the archives of the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery outside Moscow. Since that time, several scholars have speculated on the significance and importance of his journey, debated the dates of his travels, and argued whether or not Nikitin converted to Islam.[7]

While traveling and trading in India, Nikitin, a devout Orthodox Christian, passed himself off as a Muslim. Nikitin revealed in his account how he dressed like a Muslim, prayed with Muslims, and fasted during Muslim holy days. He gave himself a Muslim name. But did he convert to Islam? This article examines the personal experiences of Afanasii Nikitin as preserved in *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* and places the degree and meaning of his spiritual transformation into the wider discussion of conversion and Islamization along the vibrant fif-

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[5] For a detailed account of the three collections where scholars can find variants of *Voyage* (Chronicle Collection, Trinity [Ermolin] Collection, and Sukhanov Collection), see Lur'e, "Arkheograficheskii Obzor," pp. 108–124.

[6] "The notes certainly consist of different 'layers' of time" (Lur'e, "Russkii 'Chuzhezemets,'" pp. 69–70). Nikitin did not include the years of his journey, which has led to problems dating his travels. V. B. Perkhavko suggests in "Vozvrashchenie Afanasia Nikitina," *Moskovskii Zhurnal* no. 2 (2002): 2–6 that Nikitin probably arrived in Kaffa in November 1474 and finished his notes while waiting with fellow Russian traders for a spring merchant caravan back to his native Tver'. Perkhavko speculates that the merchant Stepan Vasiliev (Dimitriev) carried Nikitin's notes back to Moscow. Furthermore, the author also suspects that Stepan might have been the son of Vasilii Dmitrievich Ermolin (an important Moscow architect) and argues "it was far from accidental that one of the earliest records of *Voyage* was found in the hand-written collection of the late fifteenth century along with Ermolin's chronicle in which V. D. Ermolin's architectural and building activity was covered in great detail (the chronicle was created at his request)" (p. 5).

[7] L. S. Semenov has challenged the traditional dates of Nikitin's *Voyage* (1466–1472) as calculated by I. I. Sreznevskii in "Issledovanie o Khozhdenii za tri moria Afanasiia Nikitina," *Uchenye zapiski vtorogo otdeleniia, Rossiiskoi Akademii nauk* 2, no. 2 (1856); also published separately in 1857. Semenov persuasively argues in *Puteshestvie Afanasiia Nikitina* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980) that Nikitin stayed in India from 1471 to 1474, and that he must have left Tver' in 1468 and died near Smolensk at the end of 1474 or at the beginning of 1475. At the invitation of the Delhi Institute of International Relations, Semenov spent a year in India's National Archive investigating Nikitin's route and the dates of his journey. Russian journals and texts are now beginning to accept these new dates, so I too will accept them in this article.

teenth-century trade routes. Much of the recent focus on premodern conversion emphasizes the political, social, and economic incentives for mass conversion among entire societies. Such investigations tend to neglect individual accounts, which typically offer a personal and spiritual explanation for conversion. Nikitin's account of his adoption of Islamic practices, therefore, presents an opportunity to examine the spiritual considerations that influenced the process of conversion. It emphasizes the notion that everyday cultural interactions can provide historians with a more complete understanding of large-scale patterns and processes such as social conversion and cultural assimilation as a result of cross-cultural contact. While often reinforcing the multifactored secular explanations that currently dominate the literature, an investigation of Nikitin's travel account is significant because it reveals that secular and spiritual motivations for assimilation and conversion coexisted.

Although very little scholarship in English exists concerning Nikitin,[8] most Russians, on the other hand, are well-acquainted with their compatriot, Russia's own "Marco Polo," who reached India thirty years before the Portuguese Vasco da Gama. Since the discovery of his travel notes in 1817, Russian scholars have depicted him as a figure of state importance, a patriot, a God-fearing Christian, and a courageous and curious traveler whose name "went down side by side with the names of outstanding navigators and travelers of the era of great discoveries" such as Columbus and Magellan.[9] Today an imposing statue of his

[8] In English, see Gail Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas: Afanasij Nikitin's Journey from Orthodoxy to Apostasy," *East European Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1979): 431–447; Lenhoff and Martin, "Commercial and Cultural Context," pp. 321–344; and Sergei Hackel, "Apostate or Pioneer? Nikitin and His Dialogue in India 1469–1472," *Eastern Churches Review* 8 (1976): 162–173. Mark Batunsky offers a literary treatment of Nikitin's *Voyage* in "Muscovy and Islam," *Saeculum* 39, nos. 3–4 (1988): 277–293. See also Tillet, "Afanasii Nikitin as a Cultural Ambassador to India;" and Walter Kirchner, *The American Slavic and East European Review* 5 (1946): 46–54.

[9] Quotation from M. A. Ilyin, "Afanasii Nikitin—The First Russian Traveler to India," which was written in 1955 and republished here in *Tverskaya Starina* 19 (2000): 10. In 1821 Karamzin wrote, "At the time when Vasco da Gama was only thinking of the possibility to find a way from Africa to Hindustan, our Tver' man was trading on the Malabar coast and speaking to the local people discussing the dogmas of their faith" (Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 62). Other examples depict Nikitin as a figure of state importance, such as the 1958 film "Afanasii Nikitin." Even as recently as 2000, the local Tver' newspaper ran a series of articles titled "Could Afanasii Nikitin be a secret agent of the Tver' Prince?" (*Tverskaya Pravda,* January–February 2000). Besides a "spy" or a "scout," he is also perceived in scholarly and popular literature as a devout Christian. Lur'e remarks on V. A. Uspenskii's statement that for an Orthodox Christian like Nikitin, the whole of India was perceived as a "godless" place. Uspenskii referred to Nikitin's voyage as an "anti-pilgrimage" (Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 78).

swashbuckling figure looms along the banks of the Volga River in Tver', and his smiling face graces the bottle of the popular local beer Afanasii. His devotion to the Russian Orthodox faith throughout his travels remained unquestioned until the American scholar Gail Lenhoff proposed in 1979 that "Afanasii Nikitin did not keep the faith, but converted to Islam."[10] Since that time, at least one Russian scholar, Ia. S. Lur'e, has rejected such an idea as "groundless," yet the idea remains intriguing considering the fact that at least two other Christians traveling at approximately the same time, Nicolò de' Conti and Ludovico de Varthema, perhaps might also have converted.[11] Any argument, including this one, regarding whether Nikitin converted to Islam or maintained his Orthodox Christian faith involves a certain amount of assumption and speculation. Nonetheless, an investigation of his memoirs is all the more important because it sheds light on the questions of what constitutes religious conversion in the premodern era and how individuals' accounts help us understand this process.

Recent scholarship on conversion to Islam emphasizes the importance of defining in detail the term "conversion" in order to provide a more precise account of when, where, how, and why various peoples at different times adopted this religion.[12] Scholars have increasingly preferred the term "assimilation" or "social conversion" over the term "conversion."[13] These more precise terms suggest a secular, gradual, and peaceful process of mutual adaptation, while the term "conversion" implies a dramatic and sudden change in a person's spiritual atti-

[10] Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas," p. 434.

[11] See Lincoln Davis Hammond, *Travelers in Disguise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963) for a translation of Nicolò de' Conti's 1419–1444 journey to the Indian and the Indian Ocean region (as related to Poggio Bracciolini) and Ludovico de Varthema's 1502–1508 travel narrative to India. See also Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) for a thorough treatment of both Conti and Varthema. Both Conti and Varthema passed themselves off as Muslims during their stays in India and the Arabian Peninsula in order to establish business partnerships with Muslim merchants.

[12] Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 33–34; and Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 8–9. Bentley has identified three patterns of "cross-cultural conversion in its larger social context" including "conversion through voluntary association, conversion induced by political, social, or economic pressure, and conversion by assimilation." For definitions of conversion see also Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 113–119.

[13] Bentley, *Old World Encounters,* p. 8; Richard Eaton, "Islamic History as Global History," in *Islamic and European Expansion,* ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 24; and Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), p. 97.

tude and implies the forceful imposition of one culture upon another.[14] Both of these notions, according to recent scholarship, represent an inaccurate portrayal of premodern conversion to Islam.[15] Moreover, Richard Bulliet, a prominent historian of conversion to Islam in the medieval era, argues that any speculations about conversion garnered from individual accounts are inherently flawed because converts slant "their tale one way or another" or simply make it up.[16] Likewise, Jerry Bentley warns of the problematic nature of travel accounts.[17] In *Old World Encounters,* he uses Bulliet's term "*social conversion* to signify a process by which pre-modern peoples adopted or adapted foreign cultural traditions."[18] Bentley argues that "conversion by assimilation" accounted for a large portion of the cross-cultural conversions in the premodern world.[19] Thus much of the focus of the recent scholarship on widespread premodern conversion emphasizes the political, social, and economic incentives for conversion rather than the spiritual component, which is reflected only in individual accounts.

Even more recently, classicist and religious scholar Zeba Crook in *Reconceptualising Conversion* also reminds scholars that our psychological and emotional interpretation of conversion today was not the same as it was for Mediterranean ancients. What Crook's work demonstrates is that it is anachronistic to transport our modern interpretations and definitions across time and cultural boundaries. But Crook's work in the ancient world is not a call to abandon investigations on how or why individuals converted in the past, but rather to emphasize the need to understand conversion within its own contemporary cultural

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[14] See A. D. Nock's definition of conversion, "the reorientation of the soul," which he postulates is the "turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right" in *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 7.

[15] The most comprehensive source on the varieties of the Islamization process is Nehemia Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979). See also Ira M. Lapidus in *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 244.

[16] Richard Bulliet, "Process and Status in Conversion and Continuity," in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries,* ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi, Papers in Mediaeval Studies 9 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), p. 5.

[17] For an excellent essay on the use of travel accounts in world history, see Jerry Bentley, "Travel Narratives," World History Sources, Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, http://www.chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/travelmain.html.

[18] Bentley, *Old World Encounters,* p. 8.

[19] Ibid., p. 13.

framework. His study on conversion reveals an important theoretical issue underlying all research on conversion: What accounts for human actions—the structures of society or the creative human will? Crook has persuasively demonstrated that nothing is gained from clinging to these binary opposites, and researchers should instead examine how human agency works in conjunction within the structures of society.[20] This article answers Crook's call for more research on the topic of conversion by demonstrating how spiritual factors played an essential role in the process of conversion in the premodern era.[21] It was inconceivable for an Orthodox Russian, Latin Christian, or Muslim not to maintain some sort of spiritual identity in the fifteenth century. Without considering the relevance of spiritual factors in the conversion process during the premodern era, or their relationship to secular factors, such as trade, then a significant portion of the process is overlooked, and conversion of an individual or an entire population loses its most fundamental meaning.

An examination of medieval individual accounts, such as *Voyage Beyond Three Seas,* can provide historians with a nuanced picture of conversion. While it is appropriate for historians to approach conversion to Islam in the premodern world as a global phenomenon involving large-scale populations, it is also important to appreciate the role of the individual in world history. In revealing the specific adaptations and adoptions to Islam, the experiences of Afanasii Nikitin impart a human face to the widespread process of conversion. His story both supports the existing arguments concerning wide-scale conversions and adds new elements, such as individual spiritual concerns with prayer habits, fears of apostasy, and desires for communal worship.

Determined to make the best of the situation following the loss of all his goods at the beginning of his voyage, Nikitin chose to travel onward in search of a way to recover his losses. Although he spent nearly two years traveling from market to market across Muslim Persia, he devoted only a few lines of *Voyage* to this segment of the trip. Living among the Muslim Persians, Nikitin must have fostered friendships with his Muslim counterparts in order to establish essential relationships. Muslim merchants operated in a sophisticated commercial

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[20] Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p. 256.

[21] Ibid. For more on the spiritual aspects of conversion, see also Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, eds., *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003); and Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993).

culture founded upon trade partnerships.[22] The Qur'an itself (2:282–283) addresses how merchants should conduct their financial matters. Although Nikitin does not say so in his account, this was most likely not his first encounter trading with Muslims, and a certain familiarity and respect for their traditions already existed. Hostilities did not exclusively define relations between Orthodox Muslims and Russians, contrary to Russian chronicle accounts. Frequently, religious tolerance, princely intermarriage, military cooperation, and, above all, mutually supportive trade relations characterized Rus'-Islam relations. Although the two faiths each proclaimed that either all Christians would eventually worship only Allah or all Muslims would one day accept the Trinity, official doctrine sometimes belied common daily practices.[23] The medieval Rus' chroniclers understood that the less said about alliances between Christian states and their Muslim neighbors, the better. So despite the highly publicized wars and massacres between the Rus' and the Tatars, a modus vivendi existed for the most part as evidenced by "unofficial" individual accounts such as Afanasii Nikitin's *Voyage*. But nothing in his past prepared him for his first encounter with Hindus.

Nikitin wrote that he kept his first Easter at Hormuz and from there headed to Hindustan.[24] Apparently, he had met with some financial success in Persia, for he was able to pay one hundred rubles for passage to India for himself and a stallion. For centuries, merchants brought horses to Hormuz and delivered them across the Indian Ocean to the armies of various Indian states.[25] Upon reaching Chaul (a harbor on

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[22] See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "Islam and Business," in *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 216–224; and Abraham L. Udovitch, "Commercial Techniques in Early Medieval Islamic Trade," in *Islam and the Trade of Asia,* ed. D. S. Richards (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).

[23] See especially Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier 1304–1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Ostrowski argues that from the late fifteenth century "the Church begins to formulate the concept of the oppressiveness of Tatar rule over the Rus' land" (p. 170). Also, "While the head of the Rus' Church was no longer appointed by the Patriarch of Constantinople after 1448 and the grande prince of Rus' was no longer appointed by the Qipchaq khan after 1462, the Church bookmen, nonetheless, had to work hard to establish an ideological legitimacy for an independent, sovereign Rus' monarchy" (pp. 176–177). They did this, according to Ostrowski on p. 177, by downplaying the Mongol-influenced political practices of the Rus' authorities and substituting them with Byzantine models more to their liking. See chapter 8, "Fashioning the Khan into a Basileus," pp. 164–198.

[24] Later, however, he said he kept his "third" Easter at Hormuz. Nikitin frequently lost track of time throughout *Voyage,* making dating his journey all the more difficult.

[25] Marco Polo, too, commented on the difficulty of breeding and feeding horses in India's climate. Marco Polo, *Travels,* trans. Robert Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 264.

the Malabar coast, east of Bombay), Nikitin was greeted by the Hindu inhabitants where he remarked, "everyone goes naked; the women go bareheaded and with breasts uncovered, their hair plaited into braid. Many women are with child, and they bear children every year, and have many children. The men and women are all black. Wherever I went I was followed by many people who wondered at me, a white man."[26] For the rest of his account, Nikitin meticulously described Hindus and their novel customs and living habits in a disapproving tone, mainly because of their polytheistic religious practices. Throughout his journey he lodged in Hindu homesteads for Muslim merchants, where he reported that Hindu women cooked for and slept with their male guests. He wrote, "In India strangers put up at inns, and the food is cooked for them by women, who also make the guests' beds, and sleep with them. If you would like to sleep with one or another of them, it will cost two *shetel,* otherwise, only one *shetel*. These women are quite willing because they like white people."[27] Compared to the familiarity of Persian culture, Indian culture continued to shock and amaze Nikitin throughout his journey.

When Nikitin first arrived in India, he remained in the company of familiar Muslim circles. He landed in the independent Bahmanid kingdom, which was founded in 1347 and lasted until 1527. The Muslim Bahmanid sultans frequently waged war on the Hindu state Vijayanagar, and the Bahmanid state is commonly perceived by modern historians as a continuation of the Islamization process begun by the succession of dynasties collectively known as the Delhi Sultanates (1206–1526).[28] As the Delhi sultanates gradually lost their power during the fifteenth century, many independent states emerged, such as the Bahmanid kingdom. Nonetheless, like their predecessors, they struggled with the problem of maintaining an Islamic state in a predominantly Hindu culture. To compensate, they established aggressive and exclusive pro-Muslim policies. Semenov reports that although Muslims constituted only about 10 percent of the Bahmanid state population, they were given the best positions as civil administrators and army commanders, and they were the town gentry.[29] Thus Nikitin, who already spoke Persian and was acquainted with Muslim trading practices, had the ability to blend into the Persian-speaking Muslim upper

[26] *Khozhdenie,* p. 109.
[27] *Khozhdenie,* p. 60, from the Russian translation. This passage was expunged in the English translation of the 1960 book.
[28] John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), p. 281. Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies,* p. 438.
[29] Semenov, *Puteshestvie,* p. 75.

strata of Indian society. Nonetheless, unlike his experience in Persia, his Christian background became a cause for concern among the Muslim Indians.

In the Bahmanid city of Junnar, Nikitin encountered his first dilemma regarding conversion to Islam. According to Semenov, "the foreign Christian had a right to trade without being a citizen of the state for a year, and then he had to either leave the country or adopt Islam. But Nikitin had been in the Bahmanid state for only three months."[30] The governor of the region, whom Nikitin refers to as Khan Asad, took away Nikitin's stallion "when he learned that I was a Russian and not a Muslim."[31] Non-Muslims were not permitted to ride horses, and most likely Nikitin's ethnicity and religious orientation had been brought to the local governor's attention. Nikitin was called to his court. Asad told Nikitin:

> "I will give you back your stallion and pay you a thousand pieces of gold, if only you will accept our Muslim faith. But if you should not adopt our Muslim faith, I shall keep the stallion and exact a ransom of a thousand pieces of gold from you." And he gave me four days—till Our Redeemer's Day, during the Fast of the Holy Mother of God. And the Lord had mercy upon me on His holy day, He kept not His mercy from me, miserable sinner, and left me not to perish at Junnar among the godless. Khoja Muhammad of Khorassan arrived on the eve of our Redeemer's Day, and I humbly begged him to plead for me. And he rode to the Khan in town, and persuaded him not to convert me to his faith; he also took back my stallion. Such was the wonder wrought by the Lord on Our Redeemer's Day. And so, my Christian brothers of Rus', those of you who want to go to the land of India must leave their faith in Rus' and invoke Muhammad before setting out for the land of Hindustan.[32]

Nikitin's incident with Asad illustrates that conversion to Islam in fifteenth-century India was often a choice between financial gain or ruin. He credits his rescue not only to God, but to a Muslim named Khoja Muhammad, a Khorassani with whom he probably had already established a business relationship either in Persia or upon arriving in India. Despite Asad's change of heart, Nikitin's warning to his Orthodox brothers reveals that he believed that only Muslim merchants could survive in India.

Nikitin followed up his warning with yet another reason to main-

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[30] Ibid., p. 86.
[31] *Khozhdenie,* p. 111.
[32] Ibid.

tain a Muslim identity: the *jizya* that all non-Muslims must pay. He complained that "All toll-free goods are for the Muslim land only. . . . But we [Russians] shall not be allowed to take our goods free of toll. And the toll is high and, moreover, there are many pirates at sea. And all the pirates are pagans, not Christians or Muslims; they worship stone idols, and are ignorant of Christ."[33] Nikitin realized that Russian merchants would need to return from the west Indian coast across the Arabian Sea from either Hormuz or Basra—both controlled by Muslims. There, they would be required to pay the *jizya*. Indian ships, too, swarmed the ports of Aden and Hormuz, but as *dhimmis,* they paid the additional tax.[34] Faced with overt pressure from political authorities to convert, the financial incentives offered by adopting Islam, and the pragmatic necessity of relying only on Muslim merchants in conducting day-to-day trade, Nikitin at this point superficially converted to Islam.

Following his encounter with Asad, Nikitin maintained an outward Muslim appearance. In medieval India, clothing carried an immense symbolic message. "If an individual changed his clothing, he automatically changed his social identity," states Indian Ocean scholar K. N. Chaudhuri.[35] Without the security of a Christian community, Nikitin had no option but to adopt local attire as well as local food and housing, which also indicated religion and social status. But this transformation carried meanings and consequences that ultimately went beyond the superficial. In this manner, Nikitin reflected on an individual scale what Bentley described as social conversion on a mass scale—"conversion by assimilation": "Those who adjusted [Christians living in the Holy Land after the First Crusade in 1099] did so by learning the local languages, taking local spouses, observing local diets, and at least tolerating if not adopting local faiths. In short, they underwent a process of conversion by assimilation to the standards of a different cultural tradition."[36] Moreover, Nikitin now assumed a Muslim name,

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[33] Ibid.

[34] The Hindu merchants of Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel, and Bengal oriented their trade (under the auspices of their own shipping and capital) toward the east, the Indonesian archipelago. On Hindu merchants in the Indian Ocean, see K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 100–101. "In general," states Chaudhuri, "the medieval seaborn trade of India with the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf was left in the hands of Arabs, Persians, Jews, and Armenians" (p. 101). See also Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[35] K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 156.

[36] Bentley, *Old World Encounters,* p. 155.

Khoja Yusuf Khorassani, signifying that he was a well-to-do Persian.[37] Thus, while in India, Nikitin pragmatically deemed that it was necessary to present himself as a non-Indian Muslim in order to avoid harassment by local authorities as well as to place himself in the highest stratum of Indian society.

As Nikitin left Junnar he wrote that "we" (presumably he was traveling with other merchants, perhaps Khoja Muhammad) proceeded west across the Deccan plain toward Bidar, and along the way he noted that "all the Indian princes" (the ruling Muslim authorities in the region) "come of Khorassan, and so do all the boyars," as compared to the people of Hindustan, who "go on foot and walk fast, and are all naked and barefoot."[38] Throughout *Voyage,* Nikitin emphasized the political, military, and economic superiority of the Muslims in phrases such as "Such is the strength of the Muslim Sultan of India; the Muslim strength still holds good," as contrasted with the poverty and cultural otherness of the Hindus.[39] He clearly distinguished the sharp differences between Islam and Hinduism, and he did not hide his preference.

Only once did Nikitin attempt to forge commercial relations with Hindus.[40] When he arrived at the capital of the Bahmanid state, Bidar, he sold his stallion and tried his luck trading with the Hindus: "And I stayed at Bidar until Lent. There I came to know many Hindus and told them that I was a Christian and not a Muslim, and that my name was Afanasii, or Khoja Yusuf in the Muslim tongue. They did not hide from me while eating, trading, praying, or doing something else; nor did they conceal their wives."[41] In accordance with their religious traditions, Muslims and Hindus did not eat together. Muslims were forbidden to eat or obtain meat from *kafirs* (infidels), and Hindus also refrained from sharing food with non-Sanskritic people.[42] Apparently

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[37] "*Khodja*" is derived from the Persian "*khadja,*" which means "master" (*Encyclopedia of Islam,* s.v. "Khodja"). Nikitin must be using the name as a show of respect since he also uses "Khorassani," signifying that he was from that region in Persia. Gail Lenhoff incorrectly confuses the term "*Khodja*" with "*hajji*"—a term of honor for a male pilgrim to Mecca—and argues that Nikitin was attempting to claim that he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Lenhoff and Martin, "Commercial and Cultural Context," p. 330.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., p. 120

[40] See Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization,* p. 100. Although Hindu merchants kept sophisticated accounts of all transactions, they recorded little else about themselves, notes Chaudhuri. Almost everything historians know about Hindu merchants comes from foreign sources, such as Nikitin.

[41] *Khozhdenie,* p. 113.

[42] Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe,* p. 156.

the Hindus at first took Nikitin at face value—he was passing himself off as a Muslim as indicated by his dress, name, stallion, and the language he spoke. But by revealing himself as a Christian, he was able to enter their world with greater ease. This action demonstrates that Nikitin was not opposed to changing his religious identity if it suited his economic needs. Gail Lenhoff notes that "the Hindus held an annual trade fair at Parvattum. It was probably in order to attend this fair that Nikitin shed his Muslim identity and joined the Hindus."[43] Nikitin traveled to "Parvat, their Jerusalem, or Mecca in the Muslim tongue" where he witnessed Hindus worshiping their idols.[44] Hindu shrines and the great walled temple centers such as Parvat often served as protected commercial centers associated with pilgrims. Nikitin's comments on their dietary restrictions, nakedness, funeral rites, use of dung as fuel to bake their bread, and habit of referring to the ox as "father" and cow as "mother" seem to imply that he was uncomfortable moving in their polytheistic world. After a few months with the Hindus, he returned to Bidar "a fortnight before *Ulu Bayram,* the great Muslim feast."[45] From this point on Nikitin remained in Muslim company for the duration of his travels, and his spiritual transformation became a central theme for the remainder of his account.

Although he had been able to mark time according to the Russian Orthodox calendar thus far, Nikitin now claimed that it was impossible to keep the Christian feasts, and he increasingly uses Muslim holy days to keep track of time. For instance, upon arriving at the market fair in Alland, held at the tomb of a Muslim sheik, he remarked that "Spring came with the Feast of the Intercession of the Holy Mother of God; it is in spring, a fortnight after Intercession, that an eight-day feast is kept to honor the memory of Sheik Ala-uddin."[46] After Alland, Nikitin began to mark the Orthodox feast and holy days by their correlation to the Muslim religious calendar. He wrote:

> From Parvat I came to Bidar a fortnight before *Ulu Bayram,* the great Muslim feast. And I know not when Easter Sunday, the great day of the Resurrection of Christ, occurs, so I try to guess by signs [stars]:

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[43] Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas," p. 437.

[44] *Khozhdenie,* p. 113.

[45] Nikitin is referring to the Feast of Sacrifice *(Idal-adha)* or the Great Feast, which Muslims celebrate during the holy pilgrimage month of *Dhu al-Hijja,* the last month in the twelve-month Muslim lunar calendar. The feast occurs on the tenth day of *Dhu al-Hijja* and commemorates Abraham's sacrifice of the ram that was provided in the place of his son, Ishmael. (In the Old Testament, Isaac was the son to be sacrificed.)

[46] *Khozhdenie,* p. 112.

> with the Christians, Easter comes nine or ten days before the Muslim *Bayram*. . . . And I have forgotten all that I knew of the Christian faith and all the Christian feasts; I know not when Easter occurs, or Christmas, or Wednesday or Friday. And surrounded by other faiths, I pray to God that he may protect me. . . . And I am going back to Rus' thinking that my faith is dead, for I have fasted with the Muslims.[47]

Prior to this outburst, Nikitin *did* know the major Orthodox feast days and, apparently, he became entangled in his own subterfuge. He had already said that he kept Easter in Hormuz and that he left Chaul the seventh week of Easter. Moreover, Nikitin knew the winter in Junnar "set in on Trinity Sunday," a moveable feast, that Khan Asad had given him four days "till Our Redeemer's Day during the Fast of the Holy Mother of God" (a moveable fast) to convert, and that the fair in Alland coincided with the "Intercession of the Holy Mother of God," which begins on October 1.[48] He also claimed that he sold his horse in Bidar on Christmas Day. Surely he knew the difference between Wednesday and Friday—all Muslims were required to attend the Friday congregational service *(salat al-jum'a)* as part of the five pillars of Islam. Moreover, he noted the days of the week in which Hindus fast —Sundays and Mondays. What this passage reveals instead was that Nikitin was not keeping the Orthodox holy days, but was now worshiping alongside Muslims.

Nikitin admitted that he fasted with the Muslims during the month of March, in other words, he kept Ramadan, the holy month of fasting commemorating when the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad. If he was in Bidar in 1472, as Semenov calculates, Ramadan (the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar) began on February 11 and lasted for a month. Moreover, Nikitin stated that in the following year, 1473:

> In the month of May, I kept Easter at Muslim Bidar, in Hindustan. And the Muslims kept *Bayram* on a Wednesday in the month of May; and I had begun to fast on the first day of the month of April. O faithful Christians, those who voyage to many lands fall often into sin, and rob themselves of their Christian faith. And I, Afanasii, servant of the Lord, have been yearning for my faith with all my heart; Lent and Easter have already passed by four times [1469, 1470, 1471, 1472—it is now 1473], and yet I, sinner that I am, know not when Easter or Lent or Christmas or any other holy day comes.[49]

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[47] Ibid, p. 115.
[48] See Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas," pp. 440–441.
[49] *Khozhdenie,* p. 117.

In 1473, Easter would have occurred on April 18, and the three-day Muslim Great Feast, *Idal-adha,* would have occurred May 8.[50] Although Nikitin apparently kept one of the five pillars of Islam by fasting during Ramadan, he still refrained from eating meat as well, that is, he incorporated the Orthodox practice of abstaining from meat during the forty days of Lent into Ramadan. This presents the strongest evidence of Christian-Muslim syncretism during his travels. For the duration of his journey he participated in communal worship with his Muslim trade partners, feasting and fasting as they did, and marking time by the Muslim calendar.

While he experiences guilt for praying and worshiping alongside Muslims, Nikitin cannot resist the opportunity to maintain his spiritual identity through communal worship. Not to participate in communal worship meant the loss of his spiritual identity. Loss of spiritual identity to a fifteenth-century Christian meant absence of personal identity completely: He did not live in a modern, secular ecumene for Christians and Muslims, but one defined by allegiance to a particular faith. Thus, what began as a syncretic form of marking time, juxtaposing both Russian and Muslim holy dates, gradually evolved into his *celebrating* the Muslim holy days in place of Orthodox feast or fast days. His vocabulary now suggested that he was rationalizing to himself that the one true God, whether the God of the Orthodox or Allah of Islam, was one and the same. There is no doubt that Nikitin experienced considerable angst and guilt over new syncretic habits, yet he justifies his new religious habits by arguing that, nonetheless, he has "invoked none but His name."[51] At least, he seems to emphasize, he did not invoke Muhammad and that he avoided Hindu ceremonies. It seems that at this juncture, maintaining his monotheistic faith became of utmost importance to Nikitin while living among the idol-worshiping Hindus. He apparently determined that the only way to do this was to participate in corporate worships and fasts that recognize "one God"—whether Muslim or Orthodox.

Another sign of Nikitin's new syncretic Christian-Muslim habits was the fact that he increasingly wrote his prayers in creolized Arabic rather than Russian. While the Orthodox can pray in any language, for prayers to be efficacious, Muslims must pray in Arabic.[52] Moreover,

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[50] For Orthodox Christian and Muslim feast and fast dates during the years 1469–1474, see Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 93.

[51] *Khozhdenie,* p. 115.

[52] "An Orthodox Christian can pray in any language he pleases, so long as he prays to the Triune God. At this stage in his journey Afanasii seems to be trying to tell himself that although he has forsaken Orthodox observance and custom, he is nevertheless praying to God, who is one for all men." Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas," p. 443.

his use of Arabic also reveals the close relationship between Islam and trade in India in the fifteenth century. Nikitin wrote many parts of *Voyage* in the "basic Islamic business dialect of the Near East in which Arabic, Turkic, and Persian words are interwoven."[53] Not only was this dialect the language of traders, but also of the faithful Muslims. As a merchant and as one of the faithful, Nikitin shed his Orthodox identity and increasingly wrote his account in the language of the Qur'an, often interrupting a flow of thought with phrases such as "*Allah, abr Allah, Allah kerim, Allah rahim,*" or "O God, Great God, True God, Merciful God."[54] He ended one prayer with the phrase, "Allah the Protector, Allah the Most High, Allah the Merciful, Allah the Beneficent. Praise be to Allah."[55] This line resembles one of the most frequently uttered pious phrases of Islam, the *basmala,* which Muslims invoke prior to any significant activity such as eating, sex, public speaking, or writing—in which case it should be written down. Moreover, Nikitin addressed his prayers exclusively to Allah rather than the Trinity as invoked in the first sentence of *Voyage.*[56] Consider the long prayer to Allah in creolized Arabic that he wrote at the very end of *Voyage:*

> In the name of God the gracious the merciful. The Lord is great. God is good. The Lord is good. Jesus, God's spirit, peace on you. God is great. There is no God except the Lord. The Lord is all-knowing. Praise the Lord, thanks be to God the all-triumphant. In the name of God the gracious the merciful. He is God, there is no other God, who knows everything secret and salient. He is gracious, merciful. There is no other than Him. There is no God but the Lord. He is Lord, holiness, peace, savior judge of all that is good or evil, almighty, healing, glorifying, creator, maker, designer, He is the releaser of sin, punisher, solving all problems, nourishing, victorious, all-knowing, protecting, restoring, preserving, elevating, forgiving, subverting, all-hearing, all-seeing, right, just, and good.[57]

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[53] Serge Zenkovsky, ed., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 334.

[54] Ibid, p. 340.

[55] Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas," p. 443.

[56] *Khozhdenie,* p. 114. Lur'e and Lenhoff both agree that there is insufficient evidence to argue that Nikitin was exposed to the anti-Trinitarian heresy present in Moscow and Novgorod at the time. A. I. Klibanov presented this idea in *Reformatsionnie dvizheniia v Rossii xiv-pervoi poloviny xiv v.v.* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 183–185, 373–379.

[57] My translation from L. S. Semenov's translation of the Old Russian from the Chronicles (and gaps filled in from the Trinity text) in *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 58. Semenov relied on A. D. Zheltyakov to translate the creolized Arabic words into Russian.

In this prayer, Nikitin refers to Jesus as "God's spirit" and not as God's son as he did in his opening prayer of *Voyage*. Muslims consider Jesus a prophet and messenger of Allah, and the Qur'an refers to Jesus as a spirit *(Ruh)* created by God, but not God's son—"Say not: 'Three (trinity)!' Cease! (it is) better for you. For Allah is (the only) One."[58] Moreover, Nikitin's prayer is reminiscent of the "Ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names of God," a popular Muslim prayer that contemplated all the omnipotent and omniscient attributes of Allah. The Qur'an states, "And (all) the Most Beautiful Names belong to Allah, so call on him by them," and Abu Hurairah, the foremost transmitter of *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), narrated that "Allah has Ninety-nine names, i.e. one-hundred minus one; and whoever believes in their meanings and acts accordingly, will enter Paradise."[59] For Muslims, the word "Allah" held significant importance; it emphasized God's singular nature (no Trinity) and was especially revered as God was not represented in any other form, such as an icon. Nikitin, who had lost his books, contemplated God's singular power and glory in this prayer through various names of God—all similar to Islam's list of God's ninety-nine names. Had Nikitin forsaken the Trinity, the cornerstone of Orthodox Christianity? Had Islam's strict enforcement of monotheism, so pervasive in Nikitin's prayer above, altered Nikitin's perception of Jesus Christ?

Gail Lenhoff argues that Nikitin's neglect to pray to the Trinity or to invoke the Russian saints is evidence of his conversion to Islam.[60] She further argues that Nikitin tacitly admitted that he fulfilled four of the five pillars of Islam by avoiding to return to Russia via Mecca in order to fulfill some "wishful thinking" on his part that he did not truly convert.[61] But keeping the five pillars of Islam does not make one a Muslim; only saying the *shahada*—"There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God"—with belief makes one a Muslim. Moreover, nowhere in *Voyage* does Nikitin assert Muhammad's prophethood over the divinity of Jesus Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet even though Nikitin never admitted to formally convert to Islam

[58] Qu'ran 4:171.

[59] Qu'ran 7:180. The *hadith* passage is quoted in a reference note in M. T. Al-Hilali and M. M. Khan, *Translation of the Meaning of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language* (Madinah, Saudi Arabia: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, 1990), p. 227. Examples of these most beautiful names in English include the merciful, protector, creator, fashioner, all-knowing, bestower, all-seeing, all-forgiving, preserver, restorer, supporter, preventor, pardoner, everlasting—all very similar to Nikitin's prayer.

[60] Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas," p. 442.

[61] Ibid., p. 441.

by uttering or writing down the *shahada,* he nonetheless created a new religious identity for himself as a result of contact with Islam. That new faith was a proclamation of Christian beliefs expressed by Muslim religious prayers and practices. He became a quasi-convert to Islam. At one point he announced that "I am between faiths," and there he remained.[62]

Nikitin became increasingly convinced throughout his time in India that Allah alone could offer him protection among the infidels. The Hindu culture and religion most definitely offended Nikitin's cultural and religious sensibilities, as evidenced by the amount of time he spent characterizing their customs and religious practices. For example, he wrote that "The people [Indians] are all black and wicked, and the women are shameless; everywhere there is witchcraft, robbery, lying, and potions with which they kill their masters."[63] In comparison, he depicted the Muslims in India as stronger and wealthier and, most importantly, *not* pagan. For instance, he did not refer to the Muslims as infidels (or robbers), only the Hindus: "And all the pirates are pagans, not Christians or Muslims."[64] And although Khoja Muhammad rescued him from perishing in Junnar among the "godless," he was likely referring to "godless" Hindustan rather than the Muslims. Despite his guilt, he could not deny his desire to pray alongside Muslims given the enormous comfort he found in Islam's strict adherence to monotheism. It was Islam's devotion to the "one God" that inspired Nikitin to embrace Islam in order to satisfy his religious needs while traveling in India. Apparently these needs were met in Persia, where he had access to Christians or was, at the very least, surrounded by a religious community that acknowledged and was familiar with Christian practices. But in India he experienced unbearable religious isolation. There Muslims pressured him to convert to Islam, and the Hindu worship of the *Buts* [a Persian name for idols] only intensified his religious isolation: "[The *But*] wears no clothing, save that his buttocks are wrapped in a cloth; his face is that of an ape. And the other *buts* are stark naked, they wear nothing, and their buttocks are uncovered; and *Buts* wives are carved naked, in all their shame, and with children."[65] Nikitin viewed the religion of the Hindus as perverse, thus he found solace in the familiar monotheism of Islam.

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[62] From the Trinity (Ermolin) text of the *Voyage.* Lur'e in Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 24.

[63] *Khozhdenie,* p. 61. This sentence was not translated into English in the 1960 edition.

[64] Ibid., p. 111.

[65] Ibid., p. 114.

A large portion of *Voyage,* however, is also dedicated to Nikitin's secular and commercial concerns. He provided a detailed report on all the merchandise traded at various foreign ports as well as the distance and time it took to travel from place to place. He recorded valuable information most likely to share with other Russian merchants upon his return in an effort to aid future travels to India and beyond. New markets were an important concern; Nikitin describes Calicut as "a big harbor on the Indian Sea, and God forbid that any ship should pass by it; no one who sails past it will cross the sea unscathed. And it produces pepper, ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, spices, *adrak* [a type of ginger], and many kinds of herbs. And everything is cheap there; and slaves are very good; they are black."[66] Always alert to local stories, he repeated a local Muslim legend concerning a high mountain in Ceylon where there is a depression shaped like a human footprint, "and there Father Adam stood on a high mountain."[67] The story ascribed the footprint to Adam, whom Muslims, like Christians and Jews, also recognized as the first human God created. The local tale alleged that Adam spent several years there following his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Marco Polo also recorded this legend as well as a Buddhist legend attributed to the same mountain.[68] In this Indian cultural milieu, it was impossible for Nikitin to separate economic, political, or social activity from some legend, feast, or aspect of spiritual devotion.

On his final visit to Bidar, Nikitin claimed that he kept his fourth Easter. He wrote, "And because of the many misfortunes I went to India, for I had nothing to take to Rus', no goods being left. The first Easter Sunday found me at Kain, the second at Chapakur, in the Mazanderan country, the third at Hormuz, and the fourth at Bidar, in India, with Muslims. And there I shed many tears for the Christian faith."[69] Indeed he was confused, for earlier he stated that he kept his "first" Easter at Hormuz.[70] Nonetheless, he was very aware of *with whom* he was celebrating: "On the fifth Easter Sunday, I made up my mind to leave for Rus'. I set out from the city of Bidar a month before the Moslem *Ulu Bayram,* according to the faith of Muhammad, the Prophet of God. As for the great Christian feast—the Resurrection of Christ—I know not when to keep it, and I fasted with the Muslims

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[66] Ibid., p. 116.

[67] Ibid. The mountain, Adam's Peak or Sri Pada, the "Holy Footprint," is sacred to Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists.

[68] Marco Polo, *Travels,* pp. 281–283.

[69] *Khozhdenie,* p. 117.

[70] Ibid., p. 109.

and broke my fast when they broke theirs."[71] His tone near the end of his time in India becomes more matter-of-fact concerning celebrating Muslim holy fasts rather than Orthodox; he seems to have reconciled himself to substituting, or combining, Muslim practices for Orthodox.

Nikitin's blending of two faiths, however, did not go unnoticed by his Muslim business companions. He acknowledged that he did not always know the proper Muslim religious rituals and habits. He attempted to explain his ignorance to one of his fellow travelers saying:

> Melik [ruler] the Muslim pressed me for a long time to adopt the Muslim faith. But I answered him: "my Lord: you perform your prayers and I perform mine; you say five prayers and I say three; I am a stranger but you are not." But he said to me: "Indeed, although you profess not to be a Muslim, neither do you know the Christian faith." And then I thought over it a great deal, and said to myself: "Woe to me, miserable sinner, for I have strayed from the true path and knowing no other, must go my ways."[72]

The passage illustrates Nikitin's religious considerations and convictions that led to his decision to celebrate Muslim holidays. After being pressed on the issue, Nikitin did admit to Melik that the reason he did not perform the Muslim prayers correctly was because he was not raised as a Muslim, but as a Christian. Melik rebuked him for not practicing his true faith and for lying about it, and Nikitin finally admits that he has strayed from the "true path"—most likely he meant Orthodox rituals. Nikitin also admitted that he knew "no other [path]," for he lacked contact with Christians in India; nonetheless he would continue to praise God in a manner that he considered Christian.[73] Bereft of the means to practice Christianity, Nikitin rationalized that he has remained Christian in spirit because he remained a monotheist in the godless pagan land of the Hindus: "In you I trust, O God, save me, O Lord. I know not my way."[74] Therefore, out of necessity he prayed and fasted and feasted with the Muslims because there were no other Christians with whom to celebrate the major holidays.

As Martin and Lenhoff noted, "Not to celebrate the holidays was, in a very real sense, to lose hold of the Christian faith."[75] Ironically,

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[71] Ibid., p. 120.

[72] Ibid., p. 117. Semenov concludes that "Melik the Muslim" was probably a convert himself from the upper class of Hindus from Deccan. Semenov, *Puteshestvie,* p. 88.

[73] *Khozhdenie,* p. 117.

[74] Ibid., p. 118.

[75] Lenhoff and Martin, "Commercial and Cultural Context," p. 333.

Nikitin celebrated the Muslim holy days as the only means he felt were available to him to maintain his religious duties and spiritual identity. He prayed:

> Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, Turn not Thy face from Thy servant who sorrows. Shelter me and have mercy upon me, O God who created me; lead me not away, O Lord, from the path of righteousness, but keep me in Thy true ways, *for I have of necessity done nothing virtuous* for Thy sake in my distress, and have lived all my days in evil. Four Easter Sundays have already passed in the Muslim land, but I have not forsaken the Christian faith; and God knows what may happen. In Thee I trust, O Lord, save me, O God! [emphasis added][76]

Nikitin assimilated into Islamic culture easily because their monotheistic beliefs paralleled his Christian faith. His genuine spiritual conviction that the "one God" of the Muslims was the same as the Orthodox Christians is evidenced in his prayers that invoked God's name in Arabic (Allah), Persian (Khuda), Turkic (Tanri), and Russian (Bog): "May the Russian land be well-ordered, and may there be justice there. *Allah, Khuda,* O God, *Tanri*."[77] He may have adopted Islamic practice, but he remained a strict monotheist, which he considered his most essential spiritual duty while traveling and trading in Hindustan.

As he made plans to return home to Rus', Nikitin came to this ultimate epiphany: "As for the true faith, God alone knows it, and the true faith is to believe in one God, and to invoke his name in purity in every pure place."[78] As he searched for passage home he reflected on his spiritual journey further: "And there I, Afanasii, a damned servant of Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, pondered over the Christian faith, the Baptism of Christ, the fasts established by the Holy Fathers, and the apostolic commandments, and I longed to go to Rus'."[79] Nikitin had forgotten nothing of the Christian faith as he had claimed; indeed he chose to worship with Muslims and adopt their spiritual habits and practices. Now he was contemplating how he would reintegrate these new habits back into the Orthodox Christian world. Lur'e claimed that Nikitin could not have entertained such a notion: The punishment for apostasy demanded the death penalty.[80] Although heresy was rampant in fifteenth-century Rus', Nikitin predated the aggressive campaign against it in 1487, when the archbishop of Nov-

[76] *Khozhdenie,* p. 117.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., p. 120.
[79] Ibid., p. 121.
[80] Lur'e and Semenov, *Khozhdenie za tri moria,* p. 78.

gorod, Gennadii, convened a church council to suppress heresy by means of torture and other inquisitorial methods.[81] Fear of Orthodox authorities apparently did not seem to dissuade him from continuing to pray to Allah in creolized Arabic even after he had crossed the third sea and arrived in Kaffa, "nine days before the Fast of Advent." Nikitin died shortly thereafter, and "The rest," he says near the end of his account, "God alone knows." He ended his account with a long prayer to Allah in creolized Arabic. Although it is impossible to say whether or not Nikitin fully converted to Islam, he left enough clues in *Voyage* to determine what attracted one Orthodox Christian to Islam and ultimately led to his new religious identity.

Nikitin did not venture into the *Dar al-Islam* on a spiritual mission, but rather for commercial reasons. Yet his desire to make a profit equaled his desire to practice his Orthodox faith while traveling. Immersed in a Muslim and Hindu spiritual culture in the Indian subcontinent, Nikitin developed a syncretic form of Christian-Muslim worship. He feasted and fasted with Muslims on Muslim holy days yet still claimed that he had "not forsaken the Christian faith."[82] While traveling and trading with his Muslim business partners, he eventually understood the God of Islam, Allah, to be one and the same as the God of his Orthodox faith. Nikitin linked the commercial success of the Muslims (as well as their military and political superiority over the Hindus) with their monotheistic faith and the poverty of the Hindus with what he considered to be their distasteful polytheistic faith. As these opinions formed, he gradually adopted Islamic religious rituals in an attempt to remain both financially successful and spiritually active during his stay in the *Dar al-Islam.* Ultimately, he became a quasi-convert to Islam and would have been well on his way to full conversion had he not returned to Rus'.

The travel account of Afanasii Nikitin offers historians a picture of what conversion for one individual specifically entailed: a process of superficial conversion, religious syncretism, and, finally, an altered spiritual identity. Spiritual and secular motives were not mutually exclusive in Nikitin's case. Despite assertions that his account may be biased, it nonetheless reveals genuine concerns about conversion and especially its relationship to trade in certain regions of the fifteenth-century *Dar al-Islam.* Nikitin's quasi-conversion elucidates that conversion to Islam occurred in degrees and stages and that conversion varied throughout specific locales in the *Dar al-Islam.*

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[81] Martin, *Medieval Russia,* p. 259.
[82] *Khozhdenie,* p. 109.

Nikitin's amiable inclination toward Muslims, as a result of Rus' longstanding relationship and trade with Islamic people, predisposed him to react favorably toward Muslim cultural and religious habits. While traveling in Persia, he spoke a Muslim language and traded in familiar markets. He was not religiously isolated from other Christians and did not report any difficulty celebrating his first Easter in Hormuz. Moreover, Christians were not an anomaly in Persia and were, for the most part, accepted in Muslim society. But after he arrived in India, a completely alien culture, he faced religious isolation as well as culture shock. Nikitin found comfort in the familiar company of Muslims, and he began to associate their faith with their secular advantages as well. Confronted with coercive and aggressive pressure to convert, Nikitin passed himself off as a Muslim to escape financial ruin.

Although Nikitin initially behaved as a Muslim in order to escape financial ruin, eventually his desire to express his spirituality while trading abroad led to a form of Christian-Muslim religious syncretism. For a medieval Orthodox Russian, that meant keeping religious holy days—the feasts and fasts that define the Russian calendar—and communal prayer and worship. While celebrating his faith apparently did not present a problem for him in Persia, he languished in religious isolation in India. Confronted with the polytheistic rituals of the Hindus, he found himself attracted to the strict monotheistic beliefs of the Muslims. This manifested in a form of religious syncretism: He began to keep track of time with both Christian and Muslim holy days. Then he began to "forget" (or not keep) his Orthodox feasts and fasts and instead celebrated alongside the Muslims.[83] He had already adopted their language and dress, now he adopted their religious practices, which satisfied his need for communal prayer and worship. Moreover, Islam's rigorous monotheism did not offend his Orthodox religious upbringing.

The syncretic habits Nikitin developed help to illuminate the new emphasis in the scholarly literature on continuity as well as change in conversion. Nikitin's need to conflate Orthodox and Muslim rituals played a significant role in the evolution of his spiritual identity as a quasi-convert to Islam. For Nikitin, they offered the much needed comfort and rationalization that he was not abandoning his faith, only celebrating the same God in a new way. The similarities in and ease with which he could substitute one fast (Lent) for another (Ramadan) made Islamic religious practices an attractive alternative to orthodoxy.

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[83] See Lenhoff's translation and interpretation of Nikitin's use of "ne vedaju" in "Beyond Three Seas," p. 441.

A spiritual identity was essential for fifteenth-century individuals; an alternate identity such as atheism or a citizen of a particular nation is a construct of the modern secular world, not Christendom, Holy Mother Russia, or the *Dar al-Islam*. Nonetheless, there were clear economic incentives to convert to Islam in fifteenth-century India. Nikitin complained of the *jizya*. Moreover, aggressive rulers, such as Asad, could impoverish Christians if they avoided conversion; hence Nikitin warned his Christian brothers of Rus' that they must first invoke Muhammad prior to their arrival to Hindustan. The Muslims maintained the preeminent social and political positions in the region where Nikitin traveled; therefore, the Muslims also controlled the economic sphere in the region. Muslim partnerships offered greater economic opportunity than Hindu merchant circles, and Christian trade diaspora communities did not exist. Although Nikitin could have kept his Christian identity and faith among the Hindus, his profits would have suffered. Higher profits, therefore, depended upon Nikitin's ability to maintain a Muslim identity. But profits alone were not enough to sustain and nurture his new religious identity as a quasi-convert to Islam.

While economic, political, and social factors for conversion are easier to establish, their identification does not diminish the religious considerations that may have reinforced the obvious secular factors and ultimately sustained conversion over time. Nikitin's individual account raises broader questions regarding conversion in general: What spiritual benefits do converts receive in adopting or adapting to a new religion?[84] Do converts perceive their own religious traditions as spiritually lacking, and, if so, how does the new religion meet those needs? More studies that examine individual conversions in a particular time and locale may help explain more specifically how and why large-scale conversions to Islam occurred in the premodern world.

[84] These questions have been raised by Deryck Schreuder and Geoffrey Oddie, "What Is 'Conversion'? History, Christianity, and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia," *Journal of Religious History* 15, no. 4 (1989): 513; and Stephen Dale, *Studia Islamica* 71 (1990): 175.