Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World

The Roots of Sectarianism

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Introduction

The question of the conditions under which Jews and Christians lived in premodern Islamic societies remains contested. It is unfortunately not solely an issue of arcane academic interest. History, or more often only a half-remembered myth, informs nationalist ideologies prevalent in the successor states to now-vanished Muslim empires across Eurasia from Sarajevo to New Delhi. The dispute over the writing of the past is perhaps the most strident in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire where competing, endogenously selective memories of former defeats and atrocities serve to validate violence directed at those deemed to be outside the boundaries of the ''nation.'' Political activists who seek a return to an Islamic golden age add further urgency to the debate with their call for the establishment of authentically Muslim governments in nation-states that are also home to non-Muslim minorities. The Islamists promise to their non-Muslim fellow citizens the same levels of security and justice they assert were present in the political community (*umma*) founded by the Prophet Muhammad.[1] That such a call for the return to an idealized past can provoke fears in one religious community and fervent optimism in another is testimony to the stark difference with which a common history can be remembered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Recent Western scholarship on the Ottoman past has not been helpful in clearing up the ambiguities surrounding the historical experience of the empire's ethnic and religious minorities. Historical revisionists – and who does not seek to be a revisionist when it comes to the writing of history – have generally avoided topics that serve to segregate the peoples of the Ottoman Empire into monolithic, vertically constructed, sectarian communities. The impulse comes in partial response to the political manipulation of religious identities by the Western powers in the Ottoman *ancien régime*,

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[1] See, for example, the reputed ''Manifesto of the Islamic Revolution in Syria'' contained in the appendix of Umar Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley, CA, 1983), p. 218; Gudrun Krämer, ''Dhimmi or citizen? Muslim–Christian relations in Egypt'' in *The Christian–Muslim Frontier: Chaos, Clash or Dialogue*. Edited by Jørgen Nielsen (London, 1998), pp. 33–49.

the "Eastern Question," during the nineteenth century. Marxian models that give primacy to class over alternate social identities have inspired further revisionism. More recently still the discourse of "post-colonialism" and the stinging critique leveled by Edward Said against the assumptions and agenda of established Western scholarship on the Middle East ("Orientalism") have deprecated the writing of Ottoman history with what is perceived as an unwarranted emphasis on religious differences. This critique decries the metaphor of a religious mosaic for the Ottoman Empire so often employed by Western scholars as serving to highlight an artificial distinction between the West, as "modern" and secular, and an unchanging "Orient" constructed as being mired in religious bigotry.[2]

The criticism of the abuses of "Orientalism" as an academic discipline by Said, and those influenced by him, has been both thoughtful and substantive. Even if Westerners were not entirely responsible for the rise of sectarian animosities in the Middle East in the nineteenth century, Western observers penned much of the early literature on sectarian relations in the Ottoman Empire. They were typically biased against Muslims and their descriptions and analyses often distorted the reality of the complexity of the relationships that linked Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the twilight of the empire. As such, the received Western historical record on the conditions under which the religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire lived is tainted and requires care when consulted. Furthermore some of those who have written on the subject more recently have done so to advance the political claims of one ethnic community over another. In response to the political manipulation of research agenda surrounding the Ottoman Empire's religious minorities, many of those who would deconstruct the "Orient" avoid religion as a category of identity in their historical analyses altogether. To write or not to write about the history of non-Muslims living in Muslim states has become, and perhaps always was, all too often a political act.[3]

This is easily illustrated by a brief comparison of contemporary scholarship on the Arabic-speaking Christian and Jewish communities. The Arab nationalist historiographical tradition, established by Muhammad Kurd-ᶜAli's monumental *Khitat al-Sham* in the 1920s, presented an integrated and comprehensive imagining of the history of the Arab people of Syria which recognized sectarian differences but chose not to highlight them in the grand narrative.[4] Rather, Kurd-ᶜAli's historical vision emphasized the commonality of a Syrian Arab past. Religious differences were rendered

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[2] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); and his *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York, 1978).

[3] This is not to say that there has not been some excellent scholarship on non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*. Edited by Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis. 2 vols. (New York, 1982); *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*. Edited by Avigdor Levy (Princeton, NJ, 1994).

[4] Muhammad Kurd-ᶜAli, *Khitat al-Sham* [A Map of Syria]. 6 vols. (first published Damascus, 1925–28, 2nd edn. Beirut, 1969–72).

largely irrelevant in his recasting of Syria's history with Christianity and Judaism having been given a properly Semitic – read Arab in Kurd-ʿAli's historical imagination – pedigree. All the monotheistic faiths were thus equally valid expressions of what Kurd-ʿAli conceived to be the Syrian people's special place in world history as the receivers and transmitters of divine truths.

Arab nationalist historians after Kurd-ʿAli shared his desire to create a unitary vision of a linguistically based nation with a common history. In the nationalist-tinged construction of the past by some contemporary Arabs, Ottoman rule was every bit as imperialistic and oppressive as is the empire that lingers in the collective folk memory of Greeks or Serbs. There are significant differences, however. The Balkan Christians could conflate "Turks" and "Muslims" into one monolithic, and inherently evil, people. Muslim Slavs in Bosnia were thus configured as "Turks" in the political imagination of many of their Serb neighbors as was the case for Greek-speaking Muslims on Crete with tragic results for both peoples. Such a stark sectarian dichotomy was impossible in the Arab nationalist historical imagination, as Islam remained, even for the most secular among them, an integral part of the Arab people's heritage (*turath*). Instead, the Ottomans have often been characterized as imperialists who prefigured the later Europeans, with their tyranny compounded by their lax adherence to Islamic values and mores. Historians with Islamist, rather than nationalist, sympathies have moderated this view recently. While still critical of some sultans, they credit those in the early centuries, as well as Abdül-Hamid (1876–1909), as having served as the defenders of Islam.[5]

Most twentieth-century European and North American scholars of Ottoman Syria have chosen not to single out the Christians for special attention whether consciously following the Arab nationalist paradigm or not. The same can be said for those researching the histories of Egypt and Iraq. There are some notable exceptions, but these serve to remind us how much research remains to be done on the individual Christian communities in the Ottoman Arab provinces.[6] With the influence of Arab nationalist

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[5] Karl Barbir, "Memory, Heritage, and History: The Ottoman Legacy in the Arab World" in *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*. Edited by L. Carl Brown (New York, 1996), pp. 100–14; Rifat Ali Abou-el-Haj, "The Social Use of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule" *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 14 (1982): 185–201; Abdul-Karim Rafeq, "Ottoman Historical Research in Syria since 1946" *Asian Research Trends* (Tokyo) 2 (1992): 45–78. James Reilly, "Past and Present in Local Histories of the Ottoman Period from Syria and Lebanon" *Middle Eastern Studies* 35 (1999): 45–65. Maurus Reinkowski, "Late Ottoman Rule over Palestine: Its Evaluation in Arab, Turkish and Israeli Histories, 1970–90" *Middle Eastern Studies* 35 (1999): 66–97.

[6] John Joseph, *Muslim–Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East: The Case of the Jacobites in an Age of Transition* (Albany, NY, 1983); Matti Moosa, *The Maronites in History* (Syracuse, NY, 1986). The missionary enterprise has received more attention: Charles Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire, 1453–1923* (London, 1983); Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du proche-orient au temps de la*

historiography infusing much of the writing of the Ottoman Arab past in the West, it has often seemed patently disloyal to politically concerned scholars to focus one's research on the religious differences among Arabic-speakers. To place Christians at the center of any research agenda might aid and abet those who would promote the politics of sectarianism in the region by providing unintended fodder for their polemic. As such, even the acknowledgment of the existence of separate religious communities in the Ottoman Arab past has been sometimes deftly sidestepped in the historical literature.

In sharp contrast, the Israeli–Palestinian struggle has generated numerous contemporary studies on the conditions of Jewish life in various Islamic societies. The history of the Jewish experience in Islam, written in the nineteenth century, was largely the product of European Jewish intellectuals. In contrast to the "Orientalist" literature on the Christians in the Muslim lands, it typically painted an optimistic picture of a Muslim–Jewish symbiosis in the medieval period that contrasted favorably with the dismal historical record of the treatment of Jews in Christian Europe. That tradition was carried forward into this century by S. D. Goitein and by those who would depict the Ottoman Empire as a haven for Jews expelled from Spain in the aftermath of the *reconquista*.[7]

The history of the Jews in Muslim Arab societies was rewritten with an emphasis on the darker side of their experience in the wake of their virtual disappearance from the Arab lands after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Prompting a call for historical revisionism, the Tunisian-born Albert Memmi suggested that more Jews had been killed in pogroms in the Muslim world than in all of Christian Europe's long history of anti-Semitism before the advent of the combined twentieth-century horrors of Nazism and Stalinism.[8] This claim subverts the image cultivated in the nineteenth century of a Jewish–Muslim golden age in order to justify Israel as a haven for Jews fleeing from what the author posits as the inherent religious intolerance of Muslim societies.[9] Most of the subsequent scholarship on Jewish communities in the Arab lands has not been as strident as Memmi's, but it has typically presented the Jews as having a history distinct from that of their Muslim and Christian neighbors.

réforme catholique (Rome, 1994); Derek Hopwood. *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843–1914: Church and Politics in the Near East* (Oxford, 1969); Uygur Kocabaşıoğlu, *Kendi belgeleriyle Anadolu'daki Amerika: 19. yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki Amerikan misyoner okulları* [America in Anatolia: American Missionary Schools in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire from their own Documents] (Istanbul, 1989); A. L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800–1901* (Oxford, 1966).

[7] S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages* (New York, 1955); Stanford Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (New York, 1991). For further discussion, see Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 3–13.

[8] Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs* (Chicago, IL, 1975). Translated by Eleanor Levieux. p. 27.

[9] See also: Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam.* Translated by David Maisel, Paul Fenton, and David Littman (Rutherford, NJ, 1985).

The reasons for not writing Ottoman history with religious identities at its core are obvious. Beyond the fear of the potential for contributing to ongoing polemics, there is the nagging doubt that an emphasis on religion as a social category in the historical discourse might distort our understanding of the Ottoman past. Christopher Bayly has raised the question of whether ordinary people in premodern India had a well-defined sense of sectarian consciousness that would conform to our contemporary construction of social identity.[10] It is a valid question for the sultan's subjects as well. In trying to assess to what degree religion shaped their everyday behavior, we must remember that Islam as a system of belief had been established in the Arab Middle East for almost a thousand years when the Ottomans arrived. Christians and Jews had been a minority for most of those centuries and most Muslims in the region could boast of a lineage that had been Muslim for generations. That reality stands in stark contrast to Mughal India where non-Muslims remained numerically, if not politically, dominant and many Muslims had only recently converted. The situation in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries more closely resembled the religious flux characteristic of the Ottoman Balkans in roughly the same period where the boundaries between different faiths were more porous than that found in the major cities of the Ottoman Arab world. There the historical record left by the Muslim and non-Muslim elites alike suggests that urban Christians and Jews had adapted to being governed by Muslim legal norms and categories. In the process, they assimilated the social distinctions and boundaries imposed by an Islamic world-view, as well as its language, as their own.

Given the pervading influence of Islamic law, religion served as the primary test which established who was included within any individual's larger political community and who stood outside it for most of the history of the Ottoman period. A religiously ordained cosmology lay at the heart of the psychological world-view of each of those who inhabited the Ottoman Arab provinces. Religious faith served as an internalized anchor to each individual's sense of broader community and as the primary signifier of his or her identity to those outside it. Custom, law, and the state mandated that this was so for each of the sultan's subjects, whether he or she was an actual believer or not. Moreover, religion possessed an inherently political dimension in Ottoman society. The Ottoman sultans proclaimed their public adherence to Islam's traditions and norms, even if some might have been lax in their interpretation of that faith's injunctions once safely behind the palace walls and out of the public gaze.

An individual's legal status for most of the Ottoman period was vested in one's religious identity as much as it was in one's gender. Being female

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[10] C. A. Bayly, "The Pre-history of 'Communalism'? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860" *Modern Asian Studies* 19 (1985): 177–203.

and/or non-Muslim carried differing degrees of subordination when dealing with a Muslim male under the legal hierarchy imposed by Islamic law (shariᶜa). Judith Tucker has recently explored the role of Islamic law in defining women's place in Ottoman Syria;[11] this volume seeks to explicate the legal position of the non-Muslims. As was the case in the definition of gender roles, the law's interpretation of the rights and obligations of Jews and Christians could change over time and from place to place. Clearly wealthy women and non-Muslims enjoyed access to power and privilege that were unimaginable to either the Muslim urban poor or peasants. But in cases dealing with women or non-Muslims, the Islamic courts when pressed upheld the social hierarchy that privileged Muslim males. The outward sign of women's dependency in the Ottoman period was the veil (*hijab*); for non-Muslims it might mean the requirement that they wear clothes dyed blue or black, or red shoes as was the case in eighteenth-century Aleppo. As a strict adherence to the law was only rarely enforced, it was more often the case what Christians and Jews could not wear: anything green (as the Prophet's own color) or white turbans. Such injunctions gave rise to a sartorial code whereby one would often know what faith the person approaching on the street professed. Simply put, you were what you wore.

In the public space of the bathhouses where clothing was shed, custom required non-Muslim men in Aleppo to wear towels identifying their religious faith. In Ottoman Cairo, it required Jews and Christians to wear colored string or religious amulets in the bathhouse;[12] similar regulations existed in Jerusalem.[13] In the case of women bathers for whom customary practice and sensibilities did not require a towel to cover them at all times, a judge in Aleppo decreed that Muslim and non-Muslim women should visit the bathhouses on separate days, lest the social division between the religious communities be blurred.[14] In fourteenth-century Cairo, the judge ibn al-Hajj had reached a similar conclusion.[15] Clothing served as a semiotic device to let members of one's own community know one belonged and as a marker to those outside it of difference. Law and customary practice decreed that Jews or Christians be immediately identifiable to each other and to the people of Islam, even if an individual's phenotype or dialect could not easily establish his or her religious community.

The question of who constituted the majority and the minority was thus transparent within the Ottoman Empire in the early modern period. Islamic

[11] Judith Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley, CA, 1998).

[12] Galal el-Nahal, *The Judicial Administration of Ottoman Egypt in the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis, MN, 1979), p. 56.

[13] Amnon Cohen, *Jewish Life under Islam*: Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 73.

[14] Damascus, Aleppo Court records, vol. LXXXIV, p. 56.

[15] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT, 1992), pp. 120–21.

law, as interpreted by the state's religious scholars (the ^{c}ulama), established the political subordination of non-Muslims to Muslims. Even in regions where Muslims were the numerical minority, they were, in effect, the legal majority as long as their territory fell under the sway of the *dar al-Islam* (House of Islam). The importance of European merchants in local economies and the rise of West European military power increasingly undermined that hierarchical ordering of intercommunal relationships after the sixteenth century. That the Europeans were also Christians inevitably altered Muslim attitudes toward the native Christians who shared their landscape. Local Christians would serve for some Muslims in the nineteenth century as convenient surrogates for the anger that could only rarely be expressed directly against the Europeans. But Muslim disquiet also emerged as a result of changes in the social and economic hierarchy governing Christian–Muslim relations. The degree of change was, in turn, brought about by each community's reaction, or inaction, to the penetration of Western political and economic hegemony with the gradual emergence of what Immanuel Wallerstein has labeled the "capitalist world system."[16]

The imbalance in the rate of acceptance of the "new" by individuals in the different religious communities sowed the seeds of social disruption. Ottoman political rhetoric in the centuries before the Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth century enshrined "tradition" as a virtue and one did not comfortably question the ways of the ancestors. Anything labeled by Muslim religious scholars as innovation (*bid^{c}a*) was tantamount to being forbidden and the embrace of the new carried the potential for religious censure.[17] Christian and Jewish religious leaders were equally wary of change. Yet things were always changing in the Middle East as institutions evolved or new ones were invented, secure behind the façade of the myth of an unchanging tradition. But when change was injected into the region in the form of Western education and political ideology by Christian Europeans themselves, rather than indirectly through neutral middlemen, Muslims were slower to embrace the new than were the region's Christians. The rate of acceptance among the Christians was in itself uneven and involved selective adaptation of Western ideas. Not all embraced the future proffered by the Europeans with equal enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the *status quo* in Ottoman society was forever transformed as individual Christians chose to assimilate certain aspects of "modernity" as defined and advanced by the Europeans. In the process, those who embraced, and profited from, the new began to distance themselves socially, economically, and perhaps even psychologically from their Muslim neighbors.

The Jews of the Ottoman Arab provinces were generally slower to

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[16] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*. 3 vols. (New York, and San Diego, CA, 1974, 1980, 1989).

[17] Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600* (London, 1973), pp. 179–85.

appropriate European innovations than was the case for some of the region's Christians. They, as individuals, had even more reason than the Muslims to view the arrival of the Christian Europeans with ambivalence and perhaps even alarm, given Europe's history of anti-Semitism and the avowed intent to convert them voiced by the Christian missionaries of various denominations who followed the merchants. The Jews from Iberia, the *Sephardim,*[18] arriving in the major commercial centers of the Arab provinces in the sixteenth century were an exception. Many of the Sephardic Jews had sojourned in the Italian city-states before finding their way eastward and brought with them new technologies and business practices from Europe as well as a knowledge of Italian, the lingua franca of Mediterranean trade. Indeed, they were often considered to be Europeans by the Ottoman officials and European consuls alike and were afforded European diplomatic protection. Although there was intellectual exchange and intermarriage between the Sephardim and the Arab Jews, an introduction to a European imagined "modernity" for the latter would have to await the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1860 when it would be packaged by European Jews for them specifically.

The blend of European ideas and economic change that accompanied the incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into the "capitalist world system" was not always fortuitous for the region's religious minorities. Fatma Müge Göçek has suggested the new Ottoman middle classes that emerged in the nineteenth century were bifurcated, with two, largely disconnected social groups – the bureaucratic and the commercial bourgeoisie. The bureaucrats were Muslim while the merchants were predominantly non-Muslim. She proposes that this voluntary segregation contributed to ever growing cultural and political chasms, which rendered asunder the various religious communities.[19] The principal ideological outcome was the emergence of ethnically based nationalisms among the empire's diverse peoples with calamitous results – the fate of the Armenians and Greeks of Anatolia or the various Muslim populations in the Balkans.

Although sectarian unrest occurred in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, Arabic-speaking Christian intellectuals and community leaders eventually were able to articulate several options with which to configure their political community as the empire collapsed under the weight of myriad ethnic antagonisms. Their choices were usually very different from those explored by their coreligionists elsewhere in the empire. This was due, in part, to the very crucial fact that Christian Arabs shared a common language and

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[18] There is a tendency to refer to all Jews from Muslim lands as *Sephardim*, rather than distinguishing *Sephardim* from *Mizrachim* (literally, "Easterners"). I will use the term more narrowly to mean only those Jews from Iberia, and their descendants, who in the Ottoman period continued to speak Judeo-Spanish (*Ladino* or *Judezmo*).

[19] Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (New York, 1996).

culture with their Muslim neighbors. Configured solely as religious communities, they were also clearly in the numerical minority almost everywhere, unlike the Christians in the Balkans or even in the ethnically contested regions of Anatolia where the various communities could at least pretend they were in the majority by manipulating suspect census data. The political realities recognized by Christian Arabs were remarkably similar to those facing the Jews throughout Ottoman Europe who found the rising tide of Balkan Christian nationalism to be often accompanied by the old demon of anti-Semitism. The choices for Christian Arabs and Ottoman Jews alike were to retain a distinct communal identity as in the past or to identify themselves within the parameters of a political community that would include their Muslim neighbors. Only among a very few did the possibility of religiously based nationalisms – "Greater Lebanon" and Zionism – intrude before the First World War.

In a movement away from defining community solely by religious faith, the non-Muslim elites in the Arab provinces increasingly chose the option of a secular political identity, whether Ottomanism or Arabism, as the empire stumbled into the twentieth century. The choice of those who would embrace a collective identity that would create a space for them within the wider Muslim majority became all the more appealing as some Muslim intellectuals also began to articulate tentative definitions of political community, devoid of sectarian dissonance. Sectarian violence had erupted earlier in the Ottoman Arab provinces than it did in Anatolia. That the Arab elites, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, were able to avoid any further open ruptures along religious lines, when the empire collapsed and neighboring Anatolia exploded into a paroxysm of ethnic violence, says much about the sea change which had occurred in their articulation of their political identity.

Benedict Anderson suggests that identification with the concept of "nation" can only arise among a people when there is a sense of political community, i.e. a shared identity more widely defined than by lineage alone. Anderson acknowledges, however, not every community conceives itself within the framework of a nation, which he defines as an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[20] The prerequisite for his nationhood is the acknowledgment by individuals that a political compact links them to others with whom they share a recognized affinity beyond family, clan, or tribe. The parameters for inclusion can vary, depending on how the collective identity is constructed or "imagined." A shared language is perhaps the most elementary basis for recognition of mutual affinity, but geography, historical memory, or religion can also help shape the boundaries of community. More often that not, it is a

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[20] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991).

combination of more than one of these "necessary conditions." But what-
ever the basis for the political affinity, Anderson contends that it must first
be "imagined" by the elites who then have to inculcate the masses with that
articulation before it can take hold of the collective consciousness of those
who would constitute the nation. His definition is thus at odds with those
who consider ethnic/national identities to be primordial, the inevitable by-
products of a shared language and culture.[21]

Nation, as Anderson defines it, is a West European concept and a
relatively recent one at that. Although a seemingly parallel political ideology
linking culture, history, polity, and geography emerged independently in
East Asia with the Middle Kingdom of the Han Chinese, Europeans
introduced the idea of nation to most of the remaining world. This occurred
under less than optimal circumstances. The spatial delineation of a nation
was often left to those who drew the maps and the mapmakers outside of
West Europe's core were rarely indigenous. Even where the collective
identity of a colonized people coalesced into a "proto-nation" (to borrow
Eric Hobsbawm's term[22]), it arose in opposition to conquest and often
appropriated the political categories imposed by the invaders on the
indigenous inhabitants of a place. Thus, the Gaels who inhabited Britain's
island neighbor had never conceived themselves as being collectively "Irish"
until they were labeled as such by those who sought to conquer them. While
they had several synonyms for their island home, they did not associate any
of those with what they chose to call themselves. Rather, they saw the
world, much like the early Greeks, in stark cultural terms *Gael* versus *Gall*,
or "us" and "everyone else."[23] It was arguably a simplistic distinction, but
one that was shared by many peoples around the globe. By the end of the
nineteenth century, however, most of the world's inhabitants had learnt
similarly to define their own sense of an imagined community within the
parameters of the European concept of the nation-state or in conscious
opposition to it – the path chosen by Marxists and late twentieth-century
Islamists. Given the political and economic hegemony established by the
West, they could not ignore it.

Anderson's nation is at odds with the political traditions of tribal or
dynastic regimes that had served the peoples of the Middle East for
centuries.[24] It also runs contrary to the Muslim concept of *umma* (the
community of believers) which holds out its own dream of an "imagined
political community," rooted in the authenticity of the Prophet's tradition

[21] Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in
the New States" in *Old Societies and New States*. Edited by Clifford Geertz (New York,
1963), pp. 105–57.

[22] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalisms since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990).

[23] Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its
Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Cork, 1996).

[24] See the contributions to *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*. Edited by Philip
Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley, CA, 1990).

(*Sunna*). But the political *umma* has proven far too tenuous to support a unitary state for long as its very inclusiveness makes it unstable, even as it remains a political ideal to which many ordinary Muslims aspire.

Ethnic pride (*ᶜasabiyya*) had, of course, existed in Islamic societies before the introduction of European political models.[25] But nationalism was only comprehensible as the basis of a political ideology for most Middle Easterners in the nineteenth century after Western political categories were assimilated into local realities. An illustration of this appropriation of a national identity as constructed by Westerners is found in the articulation of "Turkishness" (*Türkçülük*). Throughout most of the Ottoman period, European visitors to the sultans' realms used the label "Turk" indiscriminately to mean any Muslim, regardless of his or her mother tongue. To become Muslim was to "turn Turk." Yet for any proper Ottoman gentleman at the sultan's court that term would have sounded vulgar if applied to him until the end of the nineteenth century when Muslim Ottoman intellectuals began to privilege language as the basis of a constructed national identity. Only then could the *Turchia*, which had haunted the imagination of West Europeans in the centuries after the fall of Constantinople, become the *Türkiye* of the Young Turks.

In contrast to the Muslim ideal of an indivisible *umma*, the evolution of the non-Muslim religious communities of the Ottoman Empire into officially recognized religio-political bodies (*millet*s) with powers of taxation and collective representation in the eighteenth century provided opportunities for the empire's non-Muslims to create Anderson's "imagined communities." The possibility of "nation" replacing religious community took root most easily among those peoples for whom religious identity and language were conflated. Greeks and Armenians could make the intellectual leap from a community based solely on sectarian identity to one that was reconfigured by adding mother tongue as a criterion for inclusion without too much confusion. The religious identity of both peoples already possessed a strong potential for an imagining of a national identity along the lines suggested by Anderson as their languages of liturgy, and hence literary expression, resembled their spoken vernaculars. Each community also preserved a collective memory of its own historic kingship to aid in the imagining of the possibility of, and therefore the pressing necessity for, national sovereignty. But even among Greek-speakers, it was not apparent to all that a resuscitated Byzantine Empire, rooted in Orthodoxy and with Constantinople as its redeemed capital, would be solely the preserve of Hellenes.[26]

The framers of other potential proto-nationalities in the Ottoman

[25] Metin Kunt, "Ethnic-Regional (*Cins*) Solidarity in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Establishment" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (1974): 233–39.
[26] Paschalis Kitromilides, "'Imagined Communities' and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans" *European Historical Quarterly* 19 (1989): 149–94.

Balkans could restrict the boundaries of inclusion by employing the criterion of language to create autonomous exarchates with complementary and newly reconfigured national histories. Rumanians, Serbs, and Bulgarians employed this model of the ''invention of tradition'' in the nineteenth century.[27] Religion, as defined by loyalty to autonomous exarchates, combined with language, helped to articulate compelling, and therefore historically self-evident, parameters of the imagined community for emerging Balkan nationalist identities. The creation of an ideology wedded to the concept of nation was obviously more difficult for peoples who shared a common tongue but held a variety of previously mutually exclusive religious identities: Albanians, the Bosnian Slavs, and Arabs.

The Orthodox Christian Arabs (or simply the *Rum* in both contemporary Arabic and Ottoman Turkish texts), who comprised the largest single Christian community in the Arab provinces, were subsumed in the eighteenth century in a *millet* dominated by Greeks, who occasionally exercised linguistic imperialism over their non-Hellenic coreligionists. A subordination of the linguistic identity of the non-Greek communities within the Orthodox *millet* to a newly realized national identity, articulated in the language of the patriarchate, was possible in the Balkans where some Vlachs and Slavs apparently were willing to abandon their mother tongue for the Greek of the Mother Church. Such an option, however, does not seem to have been possible for Syria's Orthodox Christians. Even if contemporary European and Ottoman sources referred to them as ''Greeks,'' their ties of language and culture to their Muslim Arab neighbors prevented easy assimilation into *Hellas*. A strong sense of localism and a reaction to Greek ecclesiastical hegemony, however, did eventually lead some of the Rum to lobby for their own separate *millet* to be articulated in Arabic (the so-called Greek Catholics, *Melkit Katolikler* in Ottoman Turkish, *Rum kathulik* in Arabic).

Language created barriers for the integration of Christian Arabs into a Hellenic *ethnos*, but Arabic did not necessarily serve as bedrock for an Arab national consciousness. The majority of the *millet* of the Rum in the Fertile Crescent did not choose to join the Melkite Catholic *millet* when that option became available and continued to be served by a predominantly Greek hierarchy until the start of the twentieth century.[28] Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of those who shared Arabic as a mother tongue were not Christians. Arabic-speaking peoples inhabited contiguous regions with a myriad of traditions and political histories. Even for those who lived within a common cultural zone such as the *Bilad al-Sham* (geographical

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[27] Dimitrije Djordjevic and Stephen Fischer-Galati, *The Balkan Revolutionary Tradition* (New York, 1981). *The Invention of Tradition*. Edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983).

[28] Hopwood, *Russian Presence*, pp. 159–200. The Arab laity of the patriarchate of Jerusalem were still protesting Greek control of the higher offices in the year 2000.

Syria) or Egypt, their confessional allegiances might pit at times community against community – Orthodox versus Catholic, Sunni versus Shiᶜa. Nonetheless, the creation of the Melkite Catholic *millet* had unintentionally provided a locally based politics of identity expressed in Arabic. The implications of that for the further articulation of an ethnic identity based in language for all Arabic-speaking Christians reached far beyond the Melkites alone.

We can plot the history of the religious minorities in the Ottoman Arab world as a narrative of change and adaptation from their initial contacts with European merchants and missionaries to the articulation of national identities at the end of the empire. This transformation affected only a small minority of urban dwellers. But they would emerge as their communities' intellectual and economic elites. Change came slowly and incrementally over several centuries for the vast majority of Muslims, Christians, and Jews of the empire alike, only to arrive with a disruptive fury in the nineteenth century when Ottoman bureaucrats in Istanbul imposed it by imperial decree. Although the number of people who personally experienced any direct impact of European economic or intellectual penetration was small, they were the historical actors who determined the collective, political trajectory of their coreligionists. The Christian elites of the empire, and to a lesser extent their Jewish counterparts, were the first of the sultan's subjects to encounter and assimilate Western ideas in any systematic way. They were also among the first to imagine, if ever so tentatively, a political identity drawn along ethnic/linguistic lines.

This characterization of the transformation of the status of the non-Muslims is, of course, not original with me. Robert Haddad advanced a similar argument for the Syrian Christians, as did Charles Issawi for all of the non-Muslims of the empire.[29] I am indebted in particular to the pioneering essay by Haddad that piqued my interest to pursue this study and to reexamine his assumptions. I do not substantially alter his characterization of the role of the Catholic–Orthodox religious confrontation in giving rise to a Syrian identity. But I differ from these earlier works by identifying the transformation as starting before the eighteenth century and by placing these developments squarely within the context of Ottoman history. Previous studies of the non-Muslims have relied heavily on European accounts and documentation, often ignoring the indigene "voice." I have sought to correct that imbalance by using sources written by Arabic-speaking non-Muslims, as well as records of the Ottoman authorities. The bureaucrats in the capital were not unaware of the transitions that were occurring in the realm they administered. Their actions often

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[29] Robert Haddad, *Syrian Christians in Muslim Society: An Interpretation* (Westport, CT, 1970); Charles Issawi, "The Transformation of the Economic Position of the *Millet*s in the Nineteenth Century" in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*. Edited by B. Braude and B. Lewis. (Princeton, NJ, 1982), vol. I, pp. 261–85.

played a decisive role in determining the fate of the empire's religious minorities and in formulating their political identities. The construction of social community was very much a product of an ongoing interaction between the Ottoman bureaucrats, representing the sultan, and his subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

This study examines the evolution of sectarian relations and political identities in the Ottoman Arab provinces over four centuries from the arrival of the Sultan Selim's army in Syria in 1516 to the start of the First World War. Given the breadth of its geographical and historical parameters, not all communities will be dealt with equally. I will not be discussing Christians and Jews outside the core provinces of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, except tangentially. Their exclusion is seemingly justified as the Ottoman regime only sporadically exercised political control over the Arab territories on the empire's periphery and the question of whether North Africa or Yemen were ever properly "Ottoman" remains. Within the Fertile Crescent, this study privileges the history of the non-Muslims of the Syrian provinces. It was there that the European influence was the most profound and the social transformation of the minorities concomitantly the most dramatic. Moreover, Syrian Christians and Jews often served as the principal transmitters of new knowledge and ideas outside their native cities to other regions of the Arabic-speaking Ottoman world.

Geographical Syria has also received the most attention from contemporary scholars of the Ottoman Arab past. These have researched many of the primary sources on non-Muslims, both in the archives of its provincial centers and in Istanbul, to an extent not yet reproduced for the other provinces. Their findings provide comparative materials for my own archival research largely focused on Aleppo. Within greater Syria, this study draws heavily on examples from that city and highlights the emergence of Catholic communities there. I justify that emphasis on two counts. Firstly, until the rapid growth of Beirut and Alexandria in the nineteenth century, Aleppo was the major locus of intercultural contact in the Arab east (*Mashriq*). Secondly, the city was home to the largest urban concentration of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Arab lands and the social evolution at the heart of this study was an urban phenomenon. As such, its religious communities were often in the vanguard of historical developments that would occur elsewhere later. I am also treating in greater detail the story of the city's Melkite Catholics as they were the first people in the region to define their communal identity through language. Hopefully, others will be tempted to test the characterizations I outline here with case studies outside Syria. The Jewish community of Baghdad, for example, seems one that clearly is in need of its own monograph.

This study focuses on change. In part, the approach is a reaction to scholarship that posits that institutions in the Ottoman Empire were

relatively static until the nineteenth century. But I also want to suggest to the reader that the peoples of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire were not simply passive recipients of a changing world order imposed from without by the Europeans. Rather they took an active lead in devising strategies to cope with change and benefit from it, thereby determining their own futures. The question of the demographic fate of non-Muslims in the Arab world in the twenty-first century is still unresolved as their presence in the region continues to decline due to emigration.[30] Whatever their future, however, I would like the reader to come away with an appreciation of the remarkable social, cultural, and political transformations they experienced in the Ottoman past.

[30] Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam*. Translated by Judy Marbro (London, 1997), pp. 174–95.