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Source: *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1/2, The New Sociological Imagination II (Dec., 2005), pp. 5-19

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20059691>

Accessed: 21/09/2009 08:37

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Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model

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Published online: 24 May 2007
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Abstract This article explores the relationship between religion and politics in the context of the recent debates on Islam and religious fundamentalism. I argue that too much attention is paid to the theological issues of Islam, and that we should rather focus on the historical conditions that tend to produce religious tolerance or intolerance. I use the Ottoman Empire as an example of a polity that succeeded in maintaining religious and ethnic toleration for the tremendous diversity it encountered within its frontiers. I analyze the specific relationship between the Ottoman state and Islam, the subordination of religion to the state, the dual role of religion as an institution and a system of beliefs as well as the intricacies of the millet system. I conclude that the particular relationship that was forged between religion and politics during the first four centuries of the empire promoted religious openness and toleration.

Key words Islam · Ottoman Empire · Millet

Introduction

Since the attacks of September 11, both public and scholarly attention has focused on the relations between western and Islamic worlds and their differences, especially in the realm of social and political values. In these debates, while western civilization has been associated with individual freedom, secularism and tolerance, Islamic civilization was associated with collective rights, individual obligations, despotism and intolerance. The impact of divisive ideas such as the “clash of civilizations” of Samuel Huntington, aggravated the separation between the categories of “east” and “west.” Differences between these realms were presented to be the result of irreconcilable interests and natural clashes between these two civilizations. The assertion of inevitable clash is contradicted by a history of past coexistence and many layers of exchange, cultural influence and borrowing that has been overlooked. Instead of imagining impermeable boundaries between east and west, we need to depict the manifold ways in which

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the histories, cultures and religious meanings traveled beyond their particularity to construct syntheses that make up the deep layers of our common patterns of existence.

Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* struck a dark cord of popular simplicity, dividing the world into essentialized categories and reinforcing the pathological status of the "other." As such, it is an inherently perilous document claiming that culture and cultural identities shape the "patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world" (Huntington, 1996, p. 20). Huntington's approach erects impervious boundaries between different cultures elevated to the status of civilizations, and makes religion the focal point of identity within cultures. This is not only an entirely inaccurate historical perspective on the construction of cultures and identities, but it also reifies an essentialized category of religion.

At the same time, in part because of the increase in different religious fundamentalisms, religion has experienced a comeback as the main category through which we depict and understand peoples, societies, cultures and history. Until quite recently the scholarly world looked at religion and ethnicity as two outdated and exclusive notions of identification that would tend to disappear with modernity and its attendant process of secularism. This teleology was rooted in the principle of the differentiation of the religious and secular spheres as the product of modernization (Weber, 1946; Durkheim, 1995). The thesis of secularization was hardly questioned (Parsons, 1977; Berger, 1967; Luckman, 1967). Concurrently, many theorists of modernization had also asserted that with industrialization and urbanization the people who moved into new spaces and jobs would also transform their identities and become modern, secular, and urban new men (Deutsch, 1953). Theorists of nationalism similarly stressed that both these processes and the need for homogeneity of language and culture to succeed at high industrialization would lead to a larger national identity. As a result, religion and ethnicity would subside into the background (Gellner, 1983). An important aspect of this argument was that modernization and secularization were indivisible, so that as countries modernized they would have to also become secularized.

Such an assumption was not without empirical basis. European countries had certainly gone through a process of secularization that was adopted by many emerging non-western countries. They reproduced, often by force, a similar trajectory of modernization and secularization in many transitions after revolutions and wars of independence such as that of Atatürk in Turkey or Nasser in Egypt. Nationalist leaders enforced strictly secular regimes, burying the Islamic traditions and practices under several layers of forced secularism. However, as we experience the role of heightened religious discourse and politics in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, we are more than ever aware that religion does not disappear and that religion and culture often change and adapt, presenting themselves as alternatives in the modern discourse. It then behooves us to pay more attention to the ways in which religion can become part of the ideas and practices of lived experience in modern societies.

The question of the rebirth of religion and its coexistence with modernity has been raised especially in the context of Islam, partly with respect to the significant rise of the role of religion in previously secularized Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran, Algeria, Egypt and Turkey, but also with regard to the rise of fundamentalist movements associated with September 11. In response, the west has assumed Islam to be intolerant and unwilling to change and modernize. Therefore, the question regarding the tolerance and flexibility of Islam has been discussed in many realms. Even though Christianity and Judaism have also accommodated extremist ideologies, it seems that the modern context puts the onus on Islam to prove that religion can also be tolerant. Hence we observe the proliferation of studies and workshops on religion, coexistence and toleration, often as a setting for the study of Islamic conditions.

In a recent collection of essays on this topic, Khaled Abou el Fadl has argued that the Koran provides us with credible arguments for both those who want to put forward a humanist Islam and those who have used it for the more extremist causes (2002, pp. 3–26). Abou el Fadl argues that both the historical and contemporary practitioners as well as the scholars have used verses of the Koran in isolation in order to bolster their claims. Islam has given birth to a variety of ideological movements, each contingent on a complexity of historical events, though they have all relied on the Koran and its particular interpretation to legitimize their claims. And, especially after September 11, many western scholars have invoked Koranic verses to make a strong argument against the possibility of tolerance in Islam (Viorist, 2002).

There is no doubt that the Koran offers a plethora of different statements that are equally holy, seemingly contradictory, as well as deeply based on the historical context into which Islam was borne and flourished. Islam therefore in theological terms has material that reads “O’ you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies. They are allies of each other, and he amongst you who becomes their ally is one of them. Verily, God does not guide the unjust.” As well as “ Those who believe, those who follow Jewish scriptures, the Christians, the Sabians, and any who believe in God and the Final Day, and do good all shall have their reward with their Lord and they will not come to fear and grieve” (Abou el Fadl, 2002, p.11, 7). Many other similar passages in the Koran make the task of attributing one particular claim to the religion quite tricky. Yet, the same is true for Judaism and Christianity: the religious texts of all three religions are open to many interpretations.

Rather than overly distracting ourselves with theological issues, I think we need to focus on the historical conditions that tend to produce religious tolerance and intolerance (Ali, 2002; Bilgrami, 2002). Akeel Bilgrami makes the case clearly when he argues that within the Koran itself, history comes to play an important role when we compare the revelations contained in the Mecca verses compared to those of the Medina. While the Mecca verses concentrate on the spiritualist and universalist aspects of the religion, the Medina verses are about state, community, inter-communal relations and other more mundane concerns that had arisen by then (Bilgrami, 2002, p. 63). Therefore, deeply embedded in the Koran there are historically contingent understandings of the role of Islam and inter-communal relations. We need to reach a better understanding of the conditions under which Islam (or any other religion) becomes flexible and adaptable and when it tends to remain more rigid and unyielding. More generally we need to ask: under what conditions has religion become a force of toleration and understanding between cultures? Where and when was religion relatively inflexible and the major agent of persecution and belligerence across cultures?

Before we delve into a study of the potential for religious understanding in a given place, we also need to remind ourselves of the simple caveat of overemphasizing the concept of “religion.” Looking at the world through a religious lens tends to overestimate its significance, drives others to see themselves in religious terms, overvalue and take excessive pride in their religion and religious accomplishments. We see the effect of this most significantly in the debates between the West and “Islam,” and in the perspective that sees Islam as irreducibly opposed to all other kinds of self identification, including larger social, political and economic organizations. We see it in the proliferation of books on Islam that view the dilemmas of Islamic societies only through an Islamic perspective, rather than the result of economic or other structural tensions.¹ In this vein, Daniel Chirot argues that

¹ Two titles among many give the flavor of this issue. Though a thoughtful book on the Middle East, the title of the book by Gilles Keppel is astonishing in its power: *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Keppel, 2004). Another example is Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in her Faith* (Manji, 2003).

such arguments are false in that rather than a civilizational divide, what we really see in the post-modern world today is a differential rate of achieving social and economic modernity (Chiot, 2001). Therefore, differences in social structural determinants of modernity and development are reinterpreted as a clash of religions and ideologies, transforming differences that can be mended into insurmountable cultural divides. Conversely, the positive is acclaimed through the religion of Islam as well, where the accomplishments of Muslim societies are recounted as those of Islam and its characteristics such as its formality, purity and the strength of its teachings. Such narrowing of identification is not only objectionable, but it is also pernicious. It is therefore important to yet again underscore the necessity of embedding religion into its historical, social-structural and cultural context.

Clifford Geertz was perhaps the most insightful social scientist of the relation between religion, culture and politics. One of his most important contributions to the study of religion and culture was to explore the position of religion in society to emphasize the particularity and historicity of religious experiences. Geertz showed that religion supports different social and cultural contexts and provides diverse patterns of existential meaning given the locality in which it is found. Therefore, the lesson of *Islam Observed* remains quintessential (Geertz, 1968). Here, Geertz described how Islam—a supposedly single creed—came into Morocco and Indonesia and adapted to social, geographical, economic and cultural milieux that it encountered. For Geertz, the mediating conditions that shape the religion are more important than the doctrines that make up the content of religion. The diversity of the concrete substance of religious experience as lived in the everyday life of believers remains far more important than its theological content. In contrast to Weber's work that considers religion as an independent cultural system Geertz's religion is more dependent on outside conditions (Weber, 1958; Laitin, 1978). In many ways Geertz's orientation to Islam in *Islam Observed* is to accentuate the diversity of Islam's accommodation to the lived world of experience and meaning. Geertz does this by studying both the local social structural as well as the cultural challenges and meanings of the contexts that Islam entered when the religion was absorbed into the two countries. He demonstrates that the nature of social and economic conditions and the metaphors and images with which society objectified its norms and values were all part of the shaping of an Indonesian or a Moroccan Islam. I take the lesson of Geertz seriously in that I apply this type of analysis with a focus on state society mediation to understanding the tolerant version of Ottoman Islam from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century.

This paper is an attempt to understand religion in a particularly open context where Islam functioned for nearly four centuries as part of a framework of the state religion and as the setting for boundaries between different religions, a tolerant and responsive framework of relations between the state and religious groups. The case was that of the Ottoman Empire from its inception in the early fourteenth century to some time in the eighteenth century after which inter-ethnic and inter-religious strife was unleashed to affect state society relations. The question I ask is how was tolerance built in the Ottoman system: how did it originate? How much was based on the peculiar relationship between Islam and the Ottoman state? How much was based on Islamic precepts of relations between Islam and the "peoples of the book"? How much on the active construction and mediation of the state and different groups? These represent a series of questions that help us determine the peculiar role of Islam in Ottoman society. I conclude that Islam played a significant role in the manner in which religion and politics became entwined in Ottoman society. That is, the Ottoman state became an Islamic state that subordinated religion to its administrative and political interests, while at the same time allowing it to become in many diverse venues relevant to society and social practice. Moreover, the empire was cognizant that its rule over

diversity, difference and the pressure of many dualities was liable to fragmentation. The solution was flexibility across difference and diversity, embracing alternatives and allowing them to flourish under the gaze and control of the state. From secular law to religious law, from orthodoxy to varieties of syncretism and heterodoxy, from the diverse administration of ethnic and religious difference, a space for alternatives and for movement existed. The concrete outcome of religious forbearance was actively constructed in the organizational and relational systems that the Ottoman state and the diverse groupings maintained.

To present the contradictory simplicity of the ideas of toleration and the complexity of the society in which they were elaborated, I begin by framing the role of Islam in Ottoman society and then proceed to provide a short historical analysis of the ways in which religious boundaries, state action and inter-religious community relations were organized to maintain religious tolerance for such a long period of time. I follow the continuities and discontinuities in the role of Islam from the inception of the Ottoman Empire through its establishment as the state religion and an important linkage between state and society. Throughout, I want to underscore the particular nature of the relationship between the state, religion and politics in the Ottoman context. The religion that came out of this particular context was both an anchor for a community of faithful and a mechanism for the rule of an empire. It was both an institution of rule and a worldview of an Islamic community. It was to be at root of the social and economic basis of power as well as the substance of the legitimating ideology of the state. Lest we understand such an array of responsibility to be worthy of note and consideration, we need to place religion in the empire into a relational context and steer clear of the temptation to study the empire simply through a religious lens. That is why following Geertz is so appealing.

First, the position of Islam at the emergence of the Ottomans and its institutionalization at the height of empire made it so that religion was adapted to the needs of the state, and contributed to the segmented integration of groups into the state. In their construction of the imperial realm Ottomans separated and differentiated between religion as institution and religion as a system of beliefs. Both the administrative and the belief systems of Islam thrived under the Ottomans, connecting the different levels of society given that in this fashion elites and common folk shared the Islamic idiom (Mardin, 1994, pp. 113–128). Second, we have to focus on the particular conditions of the emergence of the Ottoman state to understand the peculiar construction of an early model of toleration and incorporation. Here, the diversity of religions on the ground, the openness of the Ottoman leaders to the “other,” and the relatively weaker Islamic identification of the rulers allowed for a unique experience of permissiveness and forbearance. Third, the Ottoman Empire was characterized by an important set of divisions and dualities in religious institutions and practice that made it possible for the state to dominate the accommodation of religion into the life of the empire. The separation and parallel deployment of religious and secular law, the diversity of beliefs and organizations along the orthodox–heterodox range provided the state with the tools for domination. The integration of religion into the state and the coeval use of religious and secular law framed a relationship between politics and religion that was quite different than that of medieval Europe. The mosque in the Ottoman Empire was not an alternative and competitive institution to the state; it was dependent for its livelihood and its existence on the state. It worked within the state; rather than outside and opposed to the state. Finally, I look at the millet system—an ad hoc procedure for the organization and integration of non-Muslim religious communities into the empire to demonstrate how a particular understanding of Islam facilitated such a capacious administrative apparatus. These four factors succeeded to maintain a particular relationship between the state, religion and the politics of difference where the diverse groups who lived under the rule of the Ottomans could live their lives and believe in their religion in the manner that they chose.

The Nature of the Early Ottoman Polity and Islam

The Ottoman Empire which linked three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa, encompassing an array of religions, cultures, languages, peoples, climates, and various social and political structures emerged and became institutionalized between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The Osmanli dynasty, named after the first leader Osman, emerged from among many small states, emirates and principalities that housed the plains from the frontier edges of Byzantium and the foothills of Anatolia. They expanded to Southeastern Europe, the Anatolian plateau and from there to the heartlands of the Arabs, dominating Mecca and Medina. By the mid-sixteenth century, from the Danube to the Nile, from the Anatolian lands to the holy cities of Islam, the Ottomans had acquired a multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire. At first, while the Ottomans conquered land in the Balkans, they acquired a predominantly Christian population and it is only with the expansion of the empire into Arab lands in the sixteenth century that a balance between Christian and Muslim populations was reached.

Perhaps the major challenge of empire was the establishment of coherent and lasting rule over this vast array of peoples. The Ottomans' achievement at empire was based on their successful negotiating between contradictory, yet also complementary political structures, organizational forms and their cultural meanings. In their attempt to construct such rule and establish legitimacy, they had to balance ruling Christians and Jews, Slavs, Vlachs and Armenians, Muslims of Sunni, Shi'a and many Sufi beliefs, incorporate each and every one of their communities and their local traditions, but also collect taxes and administer the collectivities. This had to be done by allowing space for local autonomy, a requirement of negotiated rule. For exactly this reason, whatever religion would mean locally, it had to be about legitimacy and rule for the state.

For centuries then the Ottomans were a strong imperial polity that claimed Islam as their main source of legitimacy. They gave Islam pride of place in the empire and built many mosques and religious institutions to represent the preeminence of Islam. The rulers understood themselves as the rulers of the empire, but also the caliph, that is the leader of the Sunni Islamic community. Vis-à-vis the world this claim remained a potent source of Islamic unity and strength, but within the empire, Islam played a more constrained role. And, despite such displays of loyalty and devotion to the religious world of Orthodox Sunni Islam, Ottoman society for centuries remained free of large-scale religious conflict.²

Such a conclusion has been interpreted in different ways. For Jean Jacques Rousseau, Islam was less divisive than Catholic Christianity since Mohammed had given unity to his political system (Rousseau, 1968, p. 179). More recently many scholars have claimed that since Islam and politics did not enter into conflict, nothing akin to the Enlightenment happened in these Islamic societies. In some versions this is seen as negative and perhaps the source of the lack of modernity in Islam today. In other versions, the lack of a strong struggle between state and religion is seen approvingly. Perhaps it is more useful to find the space and time when Islam and politics worked relatively well together, leading to openness and toleration, and the Ottoman case certainly was such a case for the longest time.

The particular construction of the Ottoman state was such that it maintained and nurtured an important separation between religion as an institution and religion as a system of

² When religious conflict between the state and Shi'a communities occurred in the Ottoman Empire, it was the result of political competition and warfare between Safavid Iran and the Ottoman state. Ottomans persecuted their Shi'a populations when they believed that these acted as a fifth column inside the Ottoman territories. Ottomans did not persecute because of religious or sectarian differences. They acted on political motives when they perceived a threat to the state.

meanings and relations that connected a community of faith. Religion as an institution would help administer the empire. Religion as a system of beliefs would provide the tools for every day practice (Mardin, 1969; 1981). Mardin also argues that religion mediated between the local social forces and the more macro institutions and political structure and therefore also linked the different aspects of religion with the different levels of society. In reality, the institutional and meaning generating aspects of religion were not entirely separate in that they were connected in the person of the judge (Barkey, 2007).

As Orthodox Sunni Islam was consolidated in the empire, religion also solidified its hold over state and society, though without significant change to the basic established institutional framework. Most scholars agree that it was only with Selim I (1512–1520) that Ottoman rulers started more consciously to construct an imperial Sunni Islamic realm, with a network of religious schools (medreses) whose graduates would become employees of the state and also spread the doctrine of orthodox Islam. The Conqueror Mehmed II (1451–1481) had built new medreses in Istanbul and invited Islamic scholars from all over the world to build up the Sunni Orthodox tradition at the imperial center (Fleischer, 1986, p. 263). But he had focused much more on the construction of an empire that seemed to follow in the Roman rather than the Islamic tradition. The true architect of the Ottoman religious establishment was Sultan Suleyman (1520–1566).

The fact that it was Suleyman who earnestly incorporated Islam into the fabric of empire at this particular historical moment was enormously significant because it was done at a moment of strength and high imperial legitimacy (Zilfi, 1993). The consequences of this were far reaching. That is, publicly Islam could be welcomed as the great universal religion that would bind the empire together and provide legitimacy to the imperial house of rule. Yet, it could also be brought in and its institutionalization marked by the existing conditions and shaped by the rulers to adapt to their superiority. In what Mardin has called the “empiricism of Ottoman secular officialdom,” the Ottoman rulers embarked on a bid to build a religious elite and an educational system that would be controlled by the state (Mardin, 1991, pp. 192–5). Thus, although Islam was understood as the religion of the state, it was subordinated to the *raison d'état*. Religion functioned as an institution of the state and its practitioners emerged only as state officials.

The classical age of the empire, under the rule of Sultan Suleyman, demonstrated profusion of religion, religious offices and magistrates, only to be constrained in its frame of action. Sultan Suleyman displayed the ambition to expand the physical and intellectual capacity, as well as the numbers of students in the religious institutions of the realm. As a result, the magistrates (kadis) as the members of the judicial system of the empire were much better educated and became the most widespread, powerful and educated representatives of the state in the empire. Under Suleyman they reached every corner of the imperial lands. Given that their livelihood and their careers were dependent on state rewards, these men were fully integrated into the state and acted on behalf of its maintenance both as a religious Islamic state and a secular bureaucratic state. Similarly, at the top of the religious hierarchy, the *seyh-ul-Islam*, appointed by the sultan, was the source of spiritual advice and companionship to this latter and the author of religious opinions on the matters of state and empire. Religion had been subjugated to the state.

The position of religion as a system generating both administration and meaning was maintained in a layered and robust relationship between the state and its Sunni population. That is, the local magistrate (the *kadi*) embodied the administrative tasks of the state and the symbolic expression of the people's religiosity, becoming the key interlocutor between the state and the people, and between religious administration and the interpretation of religious meanings at the local level. At the helm of thousands of Islamic courts across the empire,

kadis were the administrators of the empire and they were also entrusted with the maintenance of a basic moral and cultural unity. Educated in the religious schools, trained in secular and regional law, kadis went out into the provinces and cities of the empire as men of the empire; they applied Islamic law; adjudicated according to the Shari'a and sultanic law, but were much more than representatives of Islam in the empire. They tied the state to the people; they were the source of unity between center and periphery. As such, they could not just be religious men; they had to be religious men of the center. In that sense the mixture they represented would have seemed odd to a medieval Catholic man. For the common folk, the Ottoman administrator represented both Islam and the state.

In the routines of daily court practice the kadis reproduced the demands of the Shari'a, both watching for transgression from Islamic life and helping to define the parameters of Islamic practice. That is, they performed Islamic practice, and even though they ruled in religious and customary local terms, they still represented the institution of Islam and connected people to the religion and its forms of thinking. The way in which they carried on their practice, listening to cases, judging in Shari'a terms, abiding by religious regulations richly conveyed a sense of Islamic identity to the people. When common folk came to court to ask for justice asking for adjudication between adversaries, and the kadi ruled as the representative of the sultan, all members of the community were re-enacting a very old traditional Islamic concept of the just ruler. Beyond the performance side of this relationship, the fact that the religious official and the religious court offered the inhabitants of a region resolution, clarification, support and relief focused the people on religion and its day-to-day signs and symbols. The court was an important source of linkage between the state and religion. In the political culture of the Ottoman state the relationship between politics and religion was carried out at both the macro and the micro local level.

The state also facilitated a pattern of negotiating between alternative legal and institutional frames, between dualities that risked creating tensions within society, but also threatened to break apart under weak rule. Islam in the Ottoman Empire was subordinated to a strong, yet flexible and integrationist state that built its cultural strength on the manipulation of a series of dualities and tensions. Throughout centuries of rule, the state was able to both segment and integrate religion along multiple dimensions, making religious institutions compliant to its interests. There were so many fractures inserted into the structure of state and society that individuals and groups found some space to maneuver. The divisions and dualities did not oversimplify groups and categories into boxes. Rather, what we see is a much more complex continuum of similarities and differences that get sorted out by negotiated action.

Among the divisions that were built into Ottoman state and society were those related to Orthodox and heterodox Islamic faith and practice, religious and secular law and the construction of an organization of religious difference, the millet system. While the Catholic Church defined those who strayed as heretics and persecuted them, the Ottomans maintained an Orthodox and a heterodox form of Islam and the many nuances in between as part of the cultural repertoire of society. What is more, the Sultan maintained control over secular (sultanic) and religious law, but also maintained both heterodox and orthodox religious leaders at the palace, often playing them against each other. There is no doubt that the Ottoman state benefited from tensions between Sunni and Sufi and Sunni and Shi'ia practices, from the division of secular and religious law, and especially, the embodiment of such tensions in the person of the magistrate, the religious official versed both in religious and secular law. Such opposing dualities were forged in the early moments of Ottoman imperial construction and maintained a healthy tension in society between the religious and the secular and different forms of the religious, both tensions, engaged in the reproduction of the polity.

Partly this was the natural result of the fact that the Ottomans did not begin with the strict establishment of a formal body of Islamic law. Rather, initial decision-making was based on the sultan and his immediate associates, on the Turkic traditions of Central Asia, the *yasa*, and on customary law, in the sense of a repertoire of local knowledge about how every day business should be carried out. Such a mix of traditions was employed effectively by a series of ruling sultans before Mehmed II (1451–81), the Conqueror, initiated and Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–66) ensured that customary laws were codified and strengthened into the *kanun*—basically as the secular laws of the realm that dealt with all the relations between subjects, officials and the state. Every sultan re-enacted these laws and since there was really nothing like a legislative council, these laws were sultanic laws to be enforced by the sultan for the sultan. Therefore though according to Islam there can be no other law than religious (*shari'a*) law, the Ottomans contradicted such a dictate by opening up the way for the legislative power of the sultan to promulgate secular law.

Tursun Bey in the fifteenth century discussed this duality in the following manner: “Government based on reason alone is called sultanic *yasak*; government based on principles which ensure felicity in this world and the next is called divine policy, or *seriat*. The prophet preached *seriat*. But only the authority of a sovereign can institute these policies. Without a sovereign, men cannot live in harmony and may perish altogether. God has granted this authority to one person only, and that person, for the perpetuation of good order, requires absolute obedience.” (Inalcik, 1973, p. 68) It is in this fashion that Ottomans early on established the authority of the sovereign ruler and his customary and secular law over religious law. That is, a sovereign and just ruler was indispensable to the application of religious law. Once again, we see the production of a tight relationship between religion and politics, articulated to promote the strength of the ruler.

An alternative defining force in the rise of Ottoman institutions and culture-specific accumulation of methods and approaches of rule came about as the result of Byzantine institutions and customs. The rise of the Ottoman Empire, as we know, occurred at the expense of the Byzantine empire, but with significant incorporation of the Byzantine elite and institutional systems of rule (Lowry, 2003; Kafadar, 1995). Both because of their need for manpower and good administration, but also because of their openness towards the other, their accommodation (*istimalet*), Ottomans were receptive to the use of Byzantine and Balkan peoples and institutions (Lowry, 2003). The incorporation and the borrowing across Christian society also reflected the lack of fully institutionalized Ottoman religious identity. As the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries rolled around, the Ottomans absorbed an equivalent number of Islamic, Jewish and Christian peoples, symbols, places of worship and ideas of co-existence: Sunni Islam had not become fixed in the structure of the Ottoman relations and therefore syncretism between Islamic and Christian ideas and religious locales was easy to maintain.

Accordingly, even Islamization as it transpired, was the result of a heterodox understanding of Islam, an active dervish based proselytism and the prevalence of Islamo-Christian sanctuaries. The two faiths increasingly came to use the same sacred space, the same locales that had been consecrated to the memory of ambiguous religious figures, bringing the faithful closer together (Balivet, 1992/4). The establishment of fraternities that combined religious and mystic elements, Christianity and Islam, and specific codes of ethic (*futuwwa*) elaborated by local dervish leaders became the norm rather than the exception.

As the Ottoman conquerors incorporated vast territories and an extraordinary medley of peoples into the empire, they—as many other large imperial states did in history—understood and managed difference. As Rodrigue suggested, Ottomans understood ‘difference’ and accepted it as such, showing no effort to transform ‘difference’ into

'sameness' (Rodrigue, 1995, pp. 81–92). incorporating and accepting the ways and the traditions of the conquered Byzantines. The importance of the Byzantine element was going to decline, but the pattern of religious openness and toleration that was initiated would be reinforced in the organization of diversity. Furthermore, the pattern of openness was to appear in other contexts, even in the development of Unitarian toleration in Hungary and its articulation in the Edict of Torda of 1568, which we now know to have been influenced by the Ottoman practice of religious tolerance (Ritchie, 2005).

While it would be tempting to say that Islam and politics, and perhaps a weaker variety of Islam (since Islam lacked strong institutionalization and state makers borrowed freely from other cultures) worked well with a strong, expansive and syncretic state, this would be simplistic. Rather, politics and religion worked at many other complex, contradictory and complementary levels. In the variety of experiences, the multiplicity of local styles of believing and worship and the contestation over the significance of particular beliefs, the Ottoman space allowed for alternatives while maintaining the essence of a broader Islam. At the same time, significant relations and divisions between religious and secular, Sunni and Sufi, politics and religion chiseled at the texture of Ottoman society maintaining conflict, choice and order at the same time.

The distinction offered by Tursun Bey early during Ottoman rule permeated the Ottoman justice system and while for Tursun Bey it represented the significance of secular sultanic law, in its daily articulation it referred to the pressure of a lived duality. Ottoman justice based on both dynastic law (*kanun*) and Islamic law (*seri'at*) did not clearly alternate in importance or domination. Rather, the two sources of law were exercised by the religious and administrative authorities of the empire and were welded together or separated out of local necessity (Gerber, 1999). The sometimes-uneasy balance between secular and Islamic law would tend to rupture under a weak ruler. In Cornell Fleischer's words: "Seri'at was universal, immutable, divinely revealed, and hence spiritually supreme, while *kanun* was regional, amendable, and created by human reason, and for that very reason was often of greater immediate relevance to the life of the Ottoman polity than the *seri'at*. Only the wisdom of the ruler, whose duty it was to protect both religion and state could keep the one from overshadowing the other." (Fleischer, 1986, pp. 290–1) Yet, in everyday practice, the workings of the *Seri'at* courts show clearly that magistrates (*kadis*) were equally adept at interpreting both religious and sultanic law, press for local custom and precedent when necessary and allow each source of legal wisdom to function as independently from the other (Gerber, 1999). I stress this conclusion since it demonstrates the degree to which the relationship between state and religion was mediated by local circumstances, particular social and economic processes that operated locally.

Another source of tension was the division between an Orthodox Sunni, imperial Islam and a heterodox Sufi popular Islam that remained the backbone of Ottoman cultural life. Sultans undoubtedly took advantage of the pressures between these visions to maintain their balance and autonomy. Early in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the rising Ottomans who needed foot soldiers both for the faith and the army deliberately exploited the zeal of the Sufi brotherhoods for conquest and settlement. The resulting alliance between the colonizing dervishes who supported the Turcoman armies and the incipient state remained sealed in the emergence of the empire. However, in the fifteenth century, the tendency of Sufi brotherhoods for rebellious activity, their quarrel with the tenets of Sunni Orthodox Islam as well as their association with the lawlessness that followed the Mongol invasion of Anatolia pushed Ottoman sultans to control Sufi institutions while also trying to integrate them into mainstream. This noteworthy realignment from open support of the Sufi brotherhoods to conservative and well-ordered Sunni orthodoxy was meant to reign in the

rebellious potential of mystic brotherhoods and dervish orders (Mardin, 1991, p. 128). It was also no doubt the result of the conquests in the Arab lands, the Ottoman move from expansion in the west to expansion in the east. Yet, the duality was nurtured and maintained. As Madeline Zilfi elegantly shows, in the seventeenth century, at the height of Sunni Islamic zealotry, rulers who condoned such orthodoxy still maintained Sufi sheiks in the palace and in the major Istanbul mosques (Zilfi, 1988, pp. 137–143). It would have been, without a doubt, also dangerous for the state to eradicate this popular aspect Islamic faith, maintained in local and powerful mystical practices and larger networks of solidarity carried by charismatic leaders. In many ways then Orthodox Sunni Islam and heterodox popular Sufi Islam competed and shared the space of the Ottoman Empire for influence and practice among the faithful. The range of phenomena that this Orthodoxy–heterodoxy duality is applied to is much broader and thicker in its complexity than has been presented up to now.³ Yet, I also recognize that in variety of experiences, multiplicity of local style of believing and worship the Ottoman space offered alternatives while maintaining the essence of a broader Islam.

Millet: A Capacious Administration of Diversity

In its bureaucratic and secular style of government, the Ottoman state was able to develop the relations that predominantly maintained an overall *raison d'état*. Islam and the state worked and reworked their relation in ways that made Islam malleable, made for multiple local Islams of different shades and tones, though all subordinated to the force of the state. Though such subordination of religious experience to the will of the state was not the only factor that made the Ottomans tolerant in practice. The other part of the equation of tolerance was the practice of diversity and inter-religious peace between Muslims and non-Muslims. That is, Ottoman tolerance was Ottoman policy with regard to the rule of religious and ethnic communities. Ottomans took pride in their cosmopolitan and pluralistic foresight on rule.

In this broad empire, Jews fleeing persecution in Europe found a welcoming sultan and Christians were so moved by the openness of the Ottoman administration, they hoped they might convert Muslims to Christianity. Many examples exist of social and cultural interchange, of migrations and relocations into the heart of the Islamic lands, of intermarriage at the level of sultans and elites as well as the common people, and of conversions to Islam. Such are the indications of the relative cultural mixes that the early Ottomans and their conquered populations seem to have exhibited. Yet, the opposite also existed in the conflicting identifications, fear of the loss of religious identity and the potential for violent confrontations. The predisposition for violence did not only exist between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also especially between Christians and Jews who lived in the empire, but were influenced by the Christian discourse on Judaism. It is therefore interesting to look at the administrative mechanisms by which inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace was constructed and maintained.

In its broad outlines the Ottoman state organized and administered a system of religious and communal rule that instituted religious boundaries, marking difference, yet allowing for enough space, movement and parallel alternative structures to maintain a divided, yet cohesive and tolerant imperial society. The core of an Ottoman version of indirect rule vis-à-vis different confessional communities was known as the *millet* system. The *millet*

³ The relationship between religion and politics and the range of phenomena that are included in this relation are expanded in my forthcoming manuscript *Empire of Difference*.

system, a loose administrative set of central-local arrangements systematized only in the nineteenth century, was a script for multi-religious rule, though it was never fully codified, nor was it ever equivalent across communities. As the simultaneous division and integration of communities into the state, it became a normative as well as practical instrument of rule, one based on the notion of social boundaries between religious communities, regulating the transactions between categories. Like many other examples of imperial indirect rule, intermediaries with a real stake in the maintenance of the status quo administered various religious communities organized into autonomous, self-regulatory units. This ensured that top down and bottom up an interest in ethnic and religious peace was upheld.

Initially the intention then was for the state to get a handle on diversity within its realm, to increase “legibility” and order, enabling administration to run smoothly and taxes to flow unhindered. The concept of legibility relates to the need of the state to map its terrain and its people, to arrange the population of a country or empire in ways that simplify important state functions such as taxation, administration, conscription and prevention of rebellion (Scott, 1998). The aftermath of the conquest of Constantinople was the most plausible moment for the emergence of new, but fluid and somewhat still opaque organizational forms that grew into three large-scale identity vessels that organized diversity in the empire. As such these were separate from each other, contained within their institutional forms, and internally administered by boundary managers who acted as intermediaries between the state and the religious community. Even though the imperial pattern of vertical integration was reproduced in religious administration, relations among communities flourished in the everyday interactions (Goffman, 1994, pp. 135–158).

Islamic law and its practice dictated a relationship between a Muslim state and non-Muslim “Peoples of the Book,” that is, Jews and Christians. According to this pact, the *dhimma*, non-Muslims would be protected, could practice their own religion, preserve their own places of worship and to a large extent run their own affairs provided they recognized the superiority of Islam. As such Islam was pervasive and the primary marker of inclusion into the political community (Masters, 2001). Its impact can be summed up in three words that described Muslim and non-Muslim communities: separate, unequal and protected. It was after all the greatest Seyh-ul Islam of the Ottoman Empire, Ebussud Efendi who ordered in his ruling that the religious communities of the realm should be separate (Masters, 2001, p. 26). The immediate public markers of a boundary between Muslims, Jews and Christians were codes of conduct, rules and regulations around dress, housing and transportation. Jews and Christians were forbidden to build houses taller than Muslim ones, ride horses or build new houses of worship. They also had to abide by rules of conduct and dress. They had to make way for Muslims, and engage in continuous acts of deference.

In addition to the Muslims, three non-Muslim *millets*, a Greek Orthodox, an Armenian and a Jewish, were organized around their dominant religious institutions, with the understanding that religious institutions would define and delimit collective life. The Greek Orthodox millet was recognized in 1454, the Armenian in 1461 while the Jewish millet remained without a declared definite status for a while though it was unofficially recognized around the same time as the other two. In 1477, there were 3, 151 Greek Orthodox households; 3, 095 combined Armenian, Latin and Gypsy households; and 1, 647 Jewish households in Istanbul. The number of the Muslim households had reached 8, 951 (Inalcik, 1969/70; 2002, p. 247, 5).

Sultans, and Mehmed II in particular, forged the early arrangements that were consequently periodically renewed by diverse communities. These arrangements folded into their practice the existing authority structures of each community and thereby, provided them with significant legal autonomy and authority. Attention was paid to maintain the internal religious and cultural composition of communities. Where there was strong

community organization and/or strong ecclesiastical hierarchy, the central state adopted these institutions as the representative structures of the community. For the Greeks, Sultan Mehmed II recognized the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Constantinople as the most powerful force among the Christian population. Jews had no overarching rabbinical authority, but an assembly of religious and lay leaders were recognized as a series of communities with their own leaders. As such, the administrative format provided for a capacious understanding of a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims and it provided room for variation in the boundary, whereby groups with distinct organizational structures produced varying state society arrangements.

When we scrutinize the establishment of this ad hoc system of religious and ethnic community management we see that it emerged within the historical context of state society relations and the necessity for the rule of diverse populations. In this context, the traditional content of Islamic law and practice helped the state define the manner in which the organization of communities could be effected. Islam helped organize the state's relations to other communities. The organizational principles prescribed by Islam, however, would not be enough since the erection of boundaries between communities and the ordering of their relations would not necessarily lead to peace and toleration. In addition, the appointment and maintenance of intermediary interlocutors between state and religious community, the equivalent of the magistrate for Muslim believers was necessary for Christians and Jews. Whether religious or lay leaders of their respective communities, these brokers were expected to maintain inter-religious and inter-ethnic peace.

Community leaders at many different levels were interested in boundary management. Among them, most naturally inclined to maintain boundaries were the religious ones. Such leaders are always interested in maintaining a community of faithful, for religious, but also financial reasons. The literature attests to the fact that the most important struggles between patriarchs, rabbis and their constituencies was related to keeping the basic religious functions of the community within its boundaries. That is, rabbis in numerous *responsas* demanded that Jews be married in Jewish court and not the kadi court and ecclesiastical courts struggled to maintain marriages that had been dissolved at the kadi court. In both cases members of the community had crossed the boundaries of their community to seek a better deal at the dominant court. The rabbis threatened, the patriarchs excommunicated their people and prohibited their burial after death (Shmuelewitz, 1984; Pantazopoulos, 1961, no. 2). Many recurring examples show the degree to which each community leader was eager to preserve relations across communities as peaceful and bounded as possible, knowing that the outbreak of violence was dearly punishable by the state. Upholding peaceful relations across the communities was in the interest of both the state and its chosen state-community brokers.

While many references and reports of toleration stress the openness of the Ottoman administration and their propensity for cosmopolitan and pluralistic rule, they attribute such openness only to the Islamic acceptance of the "peoples of the book" and the exigencies of rule over diversity. While such arguments are without a doubt correct, they underestimate the degree to which active state society management and concrete organizational efforts in daily dealings made toleration the desired outcome. We cannot stress enough the importance of the networks of state community negotiations at the interface of society.

Conclusion

The work of Huntington is based on the false assumption of the incompatibility of religious units and a false reading of history. The Ottoman Empire is a good case in point. That it

lasted longer than many other early modern political formations and that it prospered was in large part due to the understanding that the state had to work with religion, that the state had interests distinct from religion and that given diversity of identities the state had to accommodate for variety rather than force it into neat categories and boxes. Such thinking was evident in the daily workings of the empire, through the forging of an explicit relation between politics and religion and the enabling of an organizational framework, the millet system, based on a sophisticated and flexible set of arrangements between multiple actors. Once we see the complexity of such interrelated arrangements, the intricacies of such a large-scale system and observe that people were more than able to accommodate to such complexity, the simplifying assumptions of Huntington's model become useless. The expectation for conflict across fixed units remains at best ahistorical. Students of Ottoman history have known the folly of this temptation for simplicity: it was to afflict the empire in the nineteenth century. By then, the Ottomans had forgotten their most precious lesson, that in a world of difference you have to accommodate and manage rather than fall prey to a Manichean view of "us" versus "them."

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