*Eleni Gara*
Department of Social Anthropology and History
University of the Aegean (Mytilene, Greece)

# CONCEPTUALIZING INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: THE EARLY MODERN CENTURIES

## Abstract

This article presents the points of view from which interreligious relations in the Ottoman world have been approached in academic historiography, the frames of interpretation and concepts that have been used, and the critical reassessments and revisions that are currently underway. Conceptions about the position of the non-Muslims and the nature and forms of interreligious relations in the Ottoman Empire have changed perceptively over the last half century. The mosaic world of subjugated nations and self-governed religious communities (*millet*s) that lived parallel and distinct lives gave its place, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, to the plural society of extensive interreligious interaction at individual or communal level. In tandem came the shift from an emphasis on the oppression of the non-Muslims to that on toleration. We are now in a new phase of revision which focuses on the forms, extent and limits of toleration and intercommunal interaction, and pays close attention to change over time.

**Keywords:** Muslims, Christians, Jews, Ottoman Empire, interreligious relations, *millet* system, plural society, confessionalization, tolerance, discrimination, coexistence, religious strife

The Ottoman Empire was a dynastic state in the Eastern Mediterranean whose vast territories encompassed a multitude of populations and human ecologies. Religious – as well as linguistic and cultural – variety was a given in the Ottoman realm since its very beginnings in the fourteenth century, in the mixed Greco-Turkish and Islamo-Christian environment of northwestern Anatolia. It increased further with the expansion of Ottoman dominions in Europe, Asia and Africa, and became more complex in the course of time due to migration, displacement and conversion. Islam was the religion of the dynasty

and the state, but not necessarily that of the majority of the population. Anatolia and the Near East were predominantly Muslim, the European provinces and the islands predominantly Christian. Almost all urban centres had religiously mixed populations. The imperial capital, the commercial cities and the ports were veritable hubs of religious plurality: in addition to Ottoman subjects, Muslims, Jews and Christians of various denominations,[1] there were also communities of resident foreign subjects (usually Roman Catholics).

The Ottoman toleration of the non-Muslims was neither the result of neutrality or indifference in matters of faith, nor was it based on any principle of freedom of conscience. On the contrary, the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims was a fundament of the Ottoman imperial order and, until roughly the mid-nineteenth century, Muslim supremacy was enforced, maintained and reproduced by physical and symbolic means. Christians and Jews, collectively referred to as 'infidels' in both official and colloquial contexts,[2] were subject to legally defined discrimination. The scope and forms of the latter evolved and changed over time, in tandem with the elaboration of state institutions and judicial practice, and the formation of an official Ottoman law within the tradition of the Hanafi school of Islamic law.[3]

---

[1] In the Northwestern Balkans and Hungary most Christian subjects were Roman Catholic; in the rest of the Balkan Peninsula they were mostly Greek Orthodox. The islands had both Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities. The Christian populations of Anatolia were usually Gregorian Armenian or Greek Orthodox. In the Middle Eastern provinces, in addition to the above, there were also communities of the Eastern Churches (Copts, Jacobites, Maronites, Nestorians).

[2] The terms usually found in official documents, in contexts of administration and taxation, are the Persian *gebrān* (in tax cadasters) and the Arabic collective noun *kefere*. In colloquial Turkish, non-Muslims were referred to as *gâvur* (from the Arabic *kāfir*). In terms of the Islamic law, non-Muslims were *zimmi* (*dhimmī* in Arabic), i.e., protected subjects. The use of the term was as a rule confined to legal documents and did not necessarily refer to all non-Muslims: in the Ottoman sharia court records from the Balkans and Anatolia, *zimmi* is used only for Orthodox and Catholic subjects.

[3] On the evolution of Ottoman law, see, esp., Colin Imber, *Ebu's-su'ud: The Islamic legal tradition* (Edinburgh, 1997), and Guy Burak, *The second formation of Islamic law: The Ḥanafī school in the early modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 2015). See also the reviews of Burak's study by Yavuz Aykan, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xlviii, 4 (2016), 793–5, and by Colin Imber, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, xxvii, 3 (2016), 392–4.

The sharia places the non-Muslim subjects of a Muslim ruler in the category of *ahl al-dhimma* (hence the term *dhimmī* – zimmi in Ottoman parlance), namely people subject to a guarantee of protection in exchange for the payment of a special poll-tax and under the condition that they conform to a set of discriminatory rules.[4] In the Ottoman, like in other Islamic empires, Christians and Jews enjoyed personal and religious freedom, could own property, and had the right to regulate family and inheritance matters and to solve disputes with coreligionists in accordance with their own canon laws. Even though not all discriminatory rules were enforced at all times or to the same extent, persons acting contrary to their subordinate status ran the risk of retribution, including enslavement and death.[5] Legal discrimination against non-Muslims remained in force until the Tanzimat reforms (1839–76), which brought about the emancipation of Christians and Jews and reconfigured their mode of integration in the modernizing Ottoman Empire.

Variety and change over time and space; toleration of the religious other alongside encouragement of conversion to Islam and legally

---

[4] Discriminatory legislation defined the rights and obligations of the non-Muslims and regulated their relations with Muslims. It emerged in mid-ninth century and became elaborated in the course of the next centuries. '*Dhimmī* rules' include the prohibition to build new churches, synagogues and other religious buildings, to carry out public devotional ceremonies, to ring bells, to build higher houses than Muslims, to ride horses, bear arms, behave disrespectfully toward Muslims, etc. A very good overview is David M. Friedenreich, 'Christians in early and classical sunnī law', in David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (eds.), *Christian-Muslim relations: A bibliographical history*, i: *(600–900)* (Leiden, 2009), 99–114. For a recent reconceptualization of the '*dhimmī* rules' as "symptomatic of the messy business of ordering and regulating a diverse society", see Anver M. Emon, *Religious pluralism and Islamic law: Dhimmis and others in the empire of law* (Oxford, 2012).

[5] On the modalities of discrimination, cf. Rossitsa Gradeva, 'Ottoman policy towards Christian church buildings', *Études Balkaniques* (Sophia) iv (1994), 14–36; *eadem*, 'Apostasy in Rumeli in the middle of the sixteenth century', *Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies*, xxii (2000), 29–73; Donald Quataert, 'Clothing laws, state, and society in the Ottoman Empire, 1720–1829', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxix, 3 (1997), 403–25; Matthew Elliot, 'Dress codes in the Ottoman Empire: The case of the Franks', in Suraiya Faroqhi and Christoph Neumann (eds.), *Ottoman costumes: From textile to identity* (Istanbul, 2004), 102–23; M. Macit Kenanoğlu, 'Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda dinlerarası ilişkiler (14–20. yüzyıllar)', *Milel ve Nihal*, vi, 2 (2009), 103–64.

enforceable Muslim supremacy; discriminatory practices and dis-
courses but no policy of persecution; social regimes that ensured
asymmetrical access to wealth, power and prestige, but also allowed
a modicum of upward mobility to non-Muslims – these are all essential
aspects of interreligious coexistence in the Ottoman Empire, but
they have been rather difficult to accommodate within the nation-
centred or state-centred approaches that dominated the field until
quite recently. The inherent complexity of the issue has given rise to
diverse and conflicting interpretations which have often generated
unbalanced and undifferentiated accounts of interreligious relations,
a feature exacerbated by the low level of integration of the multiple
historiographic traditions about the Ottoman world. Even in recent
studies, the propensity to rely on only one type of sources, or to
resort to generalizations, often results in one-sided accounts that
underestimate the complexity of the issue.

This article is about the points of view from which interreligious
relations in the Ottoman world have been approached in academic
historiography, the frames of interpretation and concepts that have
been applied, and the critical reassessments and revisions that are
currently underway. My account does not pretend to be exhaustive.
It follows the routes of the great currents that have shaped scholarly
understandings of interreligious relations but only hints at the lesser
tributaries that have contributed to it, for instance the debates on
conversion or on legal pluralism. It also leaves aside developments in
the historiography regarding the pre-imperial and the late Ottoman
periods.[6] The former is shaped by the effort to understand the nature of
Ottoman domination in a predominantly Christian world, while
the latter is stamped by the difficulty to address the politically sensitive
issues of interreligious violence and ethnic cleansing. Both relate to an
extent to the historiographic debates on the early modern centuries[7]
but have their own autonomy. I should also clarify that this account

---

[6] I concur with Colin Imber who considers that the imperial period of
the Ottoman polity starts with the reign of Mehmed II (1451–81) and his capture
of Constantinople; cf. *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The structure of power* (New York,
2002). The conventional starting point for the late Ottoman period is the French
invasion in Egypt (1798), cf. M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A brief history of the late Ottoman
Empire* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2008).

[7] The notion usually refers to the period from the conquest of the Mamluk Empire
(1516–17) to the French invasion in Egypt (1798). In regard to the position of

is not meant to be a review article or to present any agendas for further research. Nor does it intent to censure earlier historiography, national, orientalist or other, although it engages in critique. It is rather a piece of reflexivity on my part and a product of my effort to situate the Balkan experience in a broader context of early modern Ottoman and European history. If anything, it should be read as a plaidoyer for integrative and comparative approaches. I firmly believe that this is essential for overcoming the limitations of former interpretations and for getting new insights into the articulation and change of inter-religious relations in the Ottoman Empire.

I
NATIONS UNDER THE YOKE

As a rule, national historiographies in the successor states have not been generous with their Ottoman past. In Southeastern Europe, the Ottoman period has traditionally been regarded as a time of subjugation to foreign domination, and notions of enslavement and oppression, long abandoned in academic historiography, still haunt popular imagination.[8] Conceptions centred on subjugation are also to be found in the secularly-oriented national historiographies that gave the tone in the Arab countries until the emergence of 'Islamicizing revisionism' in the 1970s.[9] Even Turkish historiography passed through a brief stage of repudiating the Ottoman past in the early republican period and continued to hold an ambivalent stance toward it for a long time afterwards. The Ottoman Empire's rehabilitation and unequivocal incorporation into the Turkish national

the non-Muslims and the shaping of interreligious relations, a more meaningful turning point is the proclamation of the Tanzimat reforms (1839).

[8] Cf. Maria Todorova, 'The Ottoman legacy in the Balkans', in L. Carl Brown (ed.), *Imperial legacy: The Ottoman imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York, 1996), 45–76; Christina Koulouri (ed.), *Clio in the Balkans: The politics of history education* (Thessaloniki, 2002).

[9] Maurus Reinkowski, 'Late Ottoman rule over Palestine: Its evaluation in Arab, Turkish and Israeli histories, 1970–90', *Middle Eastern Studies*, xxxv, 1 (1999), 69–73. See also: Rifaat Ali Abou-El-Haj, 'The social uses of the past: Recent Arab historiography of Ottoman rule', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xiv, 2 (1982), 185–201; Karl Barbir, 'Memory, heritage, and history: The Ottoman legacy in the Arab World', in Brown (ed.), *Imperial legacy*, 100–14.

narrative is a product of the ideological shifts that have taken place since the 1980s.[10]

In the master narratives of the Balkan nation states (including Greece), the metaphor of the yoke has been the *par excellence* way of describing and interpreting Ottoman rule. Originally referring to the disenfranchisement of the sultan's subjects and used to denounce the authoritarian, exploitative and arbitrary traits of the Ottoman regime,[11] the metaphor of the yoke was expanded in the course of the nineteenth century to include all aspects of the Balkan nations' experience under Ottoman rule.[12]

> [In this period] the Nation has completely lost its political independence and lives under the yoke of a conqueror of alien race and religion … The Ottoman conquest of the Greek lands caused most deep and painful changes

---

[10] Cf. Büşra Ersanlı, 'The Ottoman Empire in the historiography of the Kemalist era: A theory of fatal decline', in Fikret Adanır and Suraiya Faroqhi (eds.), *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A discussion of historiography* (Leiden, Boston, and Köln, 2002), 115–54; Maurus Reinkowski, 'The Ottoman Empire and South Eastern Europe from a Turkish perspective', in Tea Sindbaek and Maximilian Hartmuth (eds.), *Images of imperial legacy: Modern discourses on the social and cultural impact of Ottoman and Habsburg rule in Southeastern Europe* (Berlin, 2011), 21–36.

[11] In his *Thourios* (Rousing hymn) from 1797, the Greek revolutionary Rēgas Velestinlēs exhorts the sultan's subjects, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation, to rise up and fight for freedom: "… Oh King of the World, to thee I vow / with the tyrants never to agree; / neither to serve them nor to be misled / nor to their promises surrender. / As long as I live in the World, to my only aim, / to destroy them, steadfast I shall be. / Faithful to fatherland, I crush the yoke / … How our forefathers rushed like beasts / and jumped in the fire for freedom; / like them, should we, oh brothers, at once grab / arms and deliver ourselves from bitter slavery. / Let's slay the wolves who keep under the yoke / both Christians and Turks and cruelly tyrannize them. …" Verses 34–40 and 121–6 of the 1798 edition (trans. – E.G.). *Επαναστατικά τραγούδια του Ρήγα και ο Ύμνος στον Μποναπάρτε του Περραιβού: Η έκδοση της Κέρκυρας 1798* (Αθήνα, 1998). By the late eighteenth century, Greek had long been the communication and literary language of the Ottoman Orthodox Christians and it is more than probable that the notion of the yoke in the sense of political enslavement was equally familiar to non-Greeks. For the position of the Greek language, see Raymond Detrez, 'Pre-national identities in the Balkans', in Roumen Daskalov and Tchavdar Marinov (eds.), *Entangled histories of the Balkans,* i: *National ideologies and language policies* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 45–60.

[12] Cf. Konstantinos Sathas, *Τουρκοκρατουμένη Ελλάς: Ιστορικόν δοκίμιον περί των προς αποτίναξιν του οθωμανικού ζυγού επαναστάσεων του ελληνικού έθνους (1453–1821)* (Αθήναι, 1869).

in the life of the Nation and in its historical course. … The Greeks lost not only their independence but also their personal freedom and properties and were obliged to live under a regime of restrictions and humiliations, of insecurity and fear. … The regression of the Nation was very large, its decline general, both material and cultural. … [After 1669] a decrease of the Ottoman power was manifested … In tandem there intensified occurrences of internal decline in the central power and the provincial administration, in the military institution and the economic and social system of the Ottoman Empire. The Greeks managed to take advantage of these changes and to significantly improve their situation.[13]

At the core of the Turkish yoke paradigm, as the Greek example cited above clearly shows, is the loss of political independence. The subordinate position of Christians and the tyrannical rule of the Ottomans were the twin roots of all further miseries.[14] As to relations between Christians and Muslims, the Christian nations' narratives of suffering, resilience and revival did not leave much room for their consideration in terms other than those of mutual hostility, manifested in the eagerness of the Muslims to abuse the Christians and in the readiness of the latter to rebel. Only in Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where national narratives had to accommodate extensive conversion to Islam, there evolved alternative versions of the Turkish yoke paradigm, focusing more on national resilience *despite* integration than on the negation or denouncement of integration.[15]

---

[13] Quoted from the introductory texts of the two volumes about the Ottoman period of the authoritative *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους* (Αθήνα, 1974), x: *(1453–1669)*, 7; xi: *(1669–1821)*, 5.

[14] See also Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, 'The "Turkish yoke" revisited: The Ottoman non-Muslim subjects between loyalty, alienation, and riot', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 93 (2006), 177–95, esp. 180–1.

[15] Cf. Fikret Adanır, 'The formation of a "Muslim" nation in Bosnia-Hercegovina: A historiographic discussion', in Adanır and Faroqhi (eds.), *The Ottomans and the Balkans*, 267–304; Piro Misha, 'Invention of a nationalism: Myth and amnesia', in Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer (eds.), *Albanian identities: Myth and history* (London, 2002), 33–48; Edin Hajdarpašić, 'Out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire: Reflections on the Ottoman legacy in South-Eastern Europe', *Middle Eastern Studies*, xliv, 5 (2008), 715–34; Nikolay Antov, 'Emergence and historical development of Muslim communities in the Ottoman Balkans: Historical and historiographical remarks', in Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova (eds.), *Beyond mosque, church and state: Alternative narratives of the nation in the Balkans* (Budapest and New York, 2016), 31–56.

Of course, there is nothing particularly 'Balkan' in the representation of the Ottoman period as a time of national subjugation. National historiographies traditionally see in the medieval kingdoms and principalities the forerunners of modern nation-states and axiomatically presuppose that medieval 'nations' had the same notions of collective belonging and sovereignty as their modern descendants.[16] Nor is there anything uncommon in the derogatory critique of the Ottoman *ancien régime* from the vantage point of the modern(izing) nation-state. In fact, post-Ottoman national narratives were consistent with the established views about the character of Ottoman rule and about the empire's trajectory from rise to decline to fall, which had been shaped by the imperialist discourses of the nineteenth century and had been widely accepted in international historiography. Given the entrenched image of the Ottomans as aliens to the European world because of their Asian ancestry and Islamic religion, the representations of national historiographies were in fact complementing and reinforcing those of the international scholarship and vice versa.

This state of affairs started to change perceptively in the 1970s and '80s. The proliferation of studies based on Ottoman archival material revised the picture of generalized oppression and arbitrariness, which, together with the adoption of a critical stance toward national narratives, led to the discrediting of the Turkish yoke thesis.[17] At the same time, the reception of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (published in 1978) and of other critical work, arguing that the established discourses on the Middle East had been shaped by European claims to dominance, gave a thrust to the reappraisal of the Ottoman Empire already under way. Much of the scholarly work in the 1990s was done with a view to critically reassessing and revising long-established stereotypes about the Ottoman rule, which originated not only in the various national historiographies but also in orientalistic representations. The lion's share of this revisionist work relates to the paradigm of the Ottoman

---

[16] For a comparative perspective, see Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan, and Kevin Passmore (eds.), *Writing national histories: Western Europe since 1800* (London, 1999).

[17] Machiel Kiel was among the pioneers of this research. See, esp., his *Art and society of Bulgaria in the Turkish period: A sketch of economic, juridical and artistic preconditions of Bulgarian post-Byzantine art and its place in the development of the art of the Christian Balkans, 1360/70–1700: A new interpretation* (Assen and Maastricht, 1985).

decline and will not concern us here.[18] Another part, however, targeted the image of the oppressive and abusive Ottoman rule and is of relevance to this discussion.[19] As we shall see later on, we are now in the middle of a second wave of revision that emphasizes complexity and pays more attention to historical change.

In the last decades, research and academic teaching in almost all Balkan countries has followed the same trends as the international scholarship on the Ottoman Empire. In Greece, the established national narrative was already under revision in the 1980s, and the Turkish yoke paradigm was soon completely abandoned in the academia. In Bulgaria, the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 was a major turning point also for historiography. Since then, Bulgarian scholars have been among the most critical voices of nationalist interpretations of the Ottoman past. In the former Yugoslav countries, to the contrary, the wars and ethnic cleansings that accompanied the breakup of the federal state in the 1990s brought about a revival of national ideologies. This led to a recasting of national narratives, forced historians to reconsider their research priorities and made history writing a minefield for those of its practitioners who did not want to take sides. In the last decades, however, academic scholarship has managed to establish its autonomy toward national politics. Only Albanian historiography appears to be still dominated by national interpretations of the Ottoman past.[20]

Contrary to academia, the Turkish yoke thesis still dominates popular perceptions in the Christian Balkan countries,[21] while idealized

---

[18] On the decline paradigm, see, esp., Linda Darling, *Revenue-raising and legitimacy: Tax collection and finance administration in the Ottoman Empire 1560–1660* (Leiden, 1996), 1–21; Donald Quataert, 'Ottoman history writing and changing attitudes towards the notion of "decline"', *History Compass*, i, 1 (2003), 1–8; Dana Sajdi, 'Decline, its discontents and Ottoman cultural history: By way of introduction', in *eadem* (ed.), *Ottoman tulips, Ottoman coffee: Leisure and lifestyle in the eighteenth century* (London, 2014), 1–40.

[19] Cf. Kołodziejczyk, 'The "Turkish yoke" revisited'.

[20] Cf. Nicola Nixon, 'Always already European: The figure of Skënderbeg in contemporary Albanian nationalism', *National Identities*, xii, 1 (2010), 1–20 (see p. 10 for a general assessment).

[21] Cf. Srđan Milošević, 'Arrested development: Mythical characteristics of the "five hundred years of Turkish yoke"', in Sindbaek and Hartmuth (eds.), *Images of imperial legacy*, 69–77; Gergana Georgieva, 'The Kircali time as metonymy: History as emotion', in Eyal Ginio and Karl Kaser (eds.), *Ottoman legacies in the contemporary Mediterranean: The Balkans and the Middle East compared* (Jerusalem, 2013), 311–34.

images of an idyllic Ottoman past populate the discourses produced by
and for Bosniak, Albanian and other Balkan Muslims.[22] National myths
are hard to shake, especially when national audiences reject balanced
and unemotional approaches to the historical past. In Greece and else-
where, the distance between commonly accepted 'truths' and academic
representations is getting bigger every day and often results in history
wars.[23] The notion of the Turkish yoke is strong among the general
public and in non-academic writings among the Christian nations of
the Balkans, and will remain so in the foreseeable future.

<div align="center">

II

A SYSTEM OF *MILLET*S

</div>

From a national point of view, the Ottoman Empire was a world of
Turkish conquerors dominating a multitude of conquered nations.
From a supranational point of view, it was an Islamic empire ruling
over a multitude of populations with different languages, cultures
and religions. The framework for conceptualizing the position of
Christians and Jews from an Islamic and Middle Eastern perspective
was set by H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen in their two-volume *Islamic
society and the West*, which was written in the 1930s and published in
the 1950s.[24]

Gibb and Bowen regarded the Ottoman society as a 'mosaic'
composed of religious communities living parallel lives that rarely
intersected. They conceived the non-Muslim religious communities,
the *millet*s, as hierarchically organized, self-governed and introverted
bodies, the members of which had little or no relationship with reli-
gious others. In their representation, the *millet*s were well-defined
and officially recognized entities, under the spiritual authority and

---

[22] Cf. Cecilie Endresen, 'Diverging images of the Ottoman legacy in Albania',
in Sindbaek and Hartmuth, *Images of imperial legacy*, 37–52.

[23] Cf. Antonis Liakos, 'History wars: Questioning tolerance', in Guðmundur
Hálfdanarson (ed.), *Discrimination and tolerance in historical perspective* (Pisa, 2008),
77–92; Vangelis Kechriotis, 'History as a public claim and the role of the historian:
Two recent debates regarding the Ottoman past in Greece and Bulgaria', in Ginio
and Kaser (eds.), *Ottoman legacies*, 287–309.

[24] H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic society and the West: A study of
the impact of Western civilization on Moslem culture in the Near East*, 2 vols. (London,
1950–1957).

legal jurisdiction of the Christian patriarchs and the Jewish chief rabbis. Through the incorporation of the *millet*s into the imperial order, there emerged a system of indirect administration of the non-Muslims, the so-called '*millet* system', which became a distinct trait of the Ottoman Empire and ensured its longevity in spite of decline.

The publication, in 1982, of the two-volume collective work *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, revised the picture of the Ottoman 'mosaic' and opened up new directions for research.[25] In their introduction, Braude and Lewis presented the Ottoman society as an organic entity of interacting religious communities, which were not the formal *millet*s of Gibb and Bowen's account but loosely organized formations with internal differentiations and cleavages. Furthermore, in his path-breaking study on the *millet* system, Braude argued that the Ottomans did not have any coherent policy to create empire-wide administrative and fiscal communities under a religious leadership before the nineteenth century and that the concept of the *millet* system originated through a combination of myths:

> What conclusions emerge from this discussion? First, the Ottomans had no consistent policy toward non-Muslims in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and perhaps later as well. Second, as administrative policy slowly began to emerge over the centuries it was accompanied by mythmaking which created justifications for new policies by attributing them to the past.[26]

Other contributions in the same work supported Braude's findings,[27] while further research made sufficiently clear that there was no uniform way for the administration of the non-Muslim populations prior to the nineteenth century reforms. Studies on the incorporation of the Church hierarchy in the Ottoman institutional order, the extent and limits of the religious leaderships' authority, the formation and administration of non-Muslim communities, and the terminology used by the Ottoman authorities to classify non-Muslim

---

[25] Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The functioning of a plural society*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1982).

[26] Benjamin Braude, 'Foundation myths of the *millet* system', *ibidem*, i, 83.

[27] Kevork Bardakjian, 'The rise of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople,' *ibidem*, i, 89–100; Joseph Hacker, 'Ottoman policy toward the Jews and Jewish attitudes toward the Ottomans during the fifteenth century', *ibidem*, i, 117–26; Amnon Cohen, 'On the realities of the *millet* system', *ibidem*, ii, 7–18.

and Muslim subjects have amply demonstrated that the *millet* system thesis is untenable for the early centuries of Ottoman rule.[28] The views of Gibb and Bowen, however, had acquired 'a near-canonical status', as Maurits van den Boogert aptly remarks,[29] and continue to haunt scholarly works on the Ottoman Empire. Even critics of the *millet* paradigm often hesitate to abandon the term and talk about the existence of a '*millet* strategy' or a '*millet* practice'.[30]

The latest manifestation of this conceptualization is to be found in the writings of the historical sociologist Karen Barkey:

> Ottomans arranged religious difference through a more or less institutionalized *millet* system, which was a form of indirect rule based on religious difference vertically incorporated into the state system. Indirect rule was affected through religious intermediaries who were incorporated into the Ottoman administrative and fiscal apparatus of the empire and who acted as the interface with the communities.[31]

Inspired by James Scott,[32] Barkey sees in the *millet* system, which she describes as "an administrative system around the ethnoreligious

---

[28] For recent overviews of the debate, see, esp., Maurits H. van den Boogert, 'Millets: Past and present', in Anh Nga Longva and Anne-Sophie Roald (eds.), *Religious minorities in the Middle East: Domination, self-empowerment, accommodation* (Leiden, 2011), 27–45; Vjeran Kursar, 'Non-Muslim communal divisions and identities in the early modern Ottoman Balkans and the *millet* system theory', in Maria Baramova, Plamen Mitev, Ivan Parvev, and Vania Racheva (eds.), *Power and influence in South-Eastern Europe, 16–19th century* (Berlin, 2013), 97–108; Michael Ursinus, 'Communautés', in François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein (eds.), *Dictionnaire de l'empire Ottoman* (Paris, 2015), 280–3.

[29] Boogert, 'Millets', 28.

[30] "For several hundred years, the strategy that we call the *millet* system helped the Ottoman state to organize and categorize those it ruled, and to function as a legitimate source of authority over them." Daniel Goffman, 'Ottoman *millet*s in the early seventeenth century', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, xi (1994), 138. "The *millet* practice facilitated the official and unofficial functioning of many minority communities, including Kurds, for hundreds of years." Latif Tas, 'The myth of the Ottoman *millet* system: Its treatment of Kurds and a discussion of territorial and non-territorial autonomy', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, xxi, 4 (2014), 499.

[31] Karen Barkey, 'The Ottomans and toleration', in Vicki A. Spencer (ed.), *Toleration in comparative perspective* (Lanham, 2017), 94.

[32] James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven, 1998).

distinctions of the conquered peoples",[33] the Ottoman state's way to generate legibility across the differentiated and diverse character of its society. She rejects Braude's conclusions on the basis that "not only is there strong historical evidence that is at odds with such a characterization [the foundation myths], but this argument makes little sense when we think of how states work to increase legibility in the societies they encounter, and thus classify and organize them".[34] Barkey, however, fails to provide any strong historical evidence that could revise Braude's and other historians' conclusions.[35]

It is beyond the scope of this article to expound on the mis-understandings of the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its non-Muslim subjects on which the *millet* paradigm is predicated.[36] Nonetheless, given that Barkey has been recently advocating the Ottoman *millet* system as a historical example of non-territorial autonomy that can provide inspiration for the management of minorities in contemporary polities,[37] it is important to notice that her representation of non-Muslim autonomy does not correspond to Ottoman realities.

The Ottoman state used indeed broad religious categories to classify its subjects. Nonetheless, classification and terminology depended on the administrative context, and religious affiliation was not the only marker of difference to be applied.[38] One of the basic categories to be found in Ottoman Turkish taxation and judicial documents, alongside

---

[33] Karen Barkey, *Empire of difference: The Ottomans in comparative perspective* (Cambridge, 2008), 12.

[34] *Ibidem*, 116.

[35] Her subchapter on the 'institutional genesis' of the *millet* system (*ibidem*, 132–46), which is conceived as a rebuke of Braude's 'foundation-myths' thesis, has scant documentation, bibliographic or archival, and draws its main arguments from works dating from the 1950s and '60s.

[36] The most lucid discussion is Ursinus, 'Communautés'.

[37] Karen Barkey and George Gavrilis, 'The Ottoman millet system: Non-territorial autonomy and its contemporary legacy', *Ethnopolitics*, xv, 1 (2016), 24–42; Barkey, 'The Ottomans and toleration'.

[38] Cf. Baki Tezcan, 'Ethnicity, race, religion and social class: Ottoman markers of difference', in Christine Woodhead (ed.), *The Ottoman world* (London and New York, 2012), 159–70; Kursar, 'Non-Muslim communal divisions and identities'. See also Reşat Kasaba, 'Do states always favor stasis? The changing status of tribes in the Ottoman Empire', in Joel S. Migdal (ed.), *Boundaries and belonging: States and societies in the struggle to shape identities and local practices* (Cambridge, 2004), 27–48 (esp. 31–2).

those of Muslims, Orthodox (*zimmi*), Armenians (*ermeni*) and Jews (*yehudi*), was that of Gypsies (*kıptı*) which included both Muslim and Christian individuals.[39] The sultans did not use the Orthodox, Armenian and Eastern Churches or the Jewish religious leaderships as a mechanism of indirect rule, although they did use them for extracting additional taxes. Patriarchs and bishops were not entrusted with 'ruling' the faithful of their sees in secular matters and had only limited jurisdiction until the eighteenth century.[40] Bishops were spiritual leaders but not administrative heads of their communities, and their efforts to influence communal affairs were a common cause of friction.[41] Non-Muslim religious communities did enjoy a modicum of judicial autonomy and self-governance but so did other groups or communities.[42] Most importantly, Christian and Jewish judicial autonomy had a limited scope and was to a large extent informal.[43]

---

[39] Cf. Eyal Ginio, 'Neither Muslims nor Zimmis: The Gypsies (Roma) in the Ottoman state', *Romani Studies*, xiv, 2 (2004), 117–44.

[40] Cf. Elisabeth A. Zachariadou, *Δέκα τουρκικά έγγραφα για την Μεγάλη Εκκλησία (1483–1567)* (Αθήνα, 1996); Paraskevas Konortas, *Οθωμανικές θεωρήσεις για το Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο, 17ος – αρχές 20ού αιώνα* (Αθήνα, 1998); *idem*, 'From *tâ'ife* to *millet*: Ottoman terms for the Ottoman Greek Orthodox community', in Dimitri Gondicas and Charles Issawi (eds.), *Ottoman Greeks in the age of nationalism* (Princeton, 1999), 169–79; M. Macit Kenanoğlu, *Osmanlı millet sistemi: Mit ve gerçek* (Istanbul, 2004); Tom Papademetriou, *Render unto the sultan: Power, authority, and the Greek Orthodox Church in the early Ottoman centuries* (Oxford, 2015).

[41] Cf. Socrates Petmezas, 'L'organisation ecclésiastique sous la domination Ottomane', in Paolo Odorico *et al.*, *Mémoires de Synadinos, prêtre de Serrès en Macédoine (XVIIe siècle)* (Paris, 1996), 487–569; Eleni Gara, 'In search of communities in seventeenth century Ottoman sources: The case of the Kara Ferye district', *Turcica*, xxx (1998), 135–62; Kursar, 'Non-Muslim communal divisions and identities'.

[42] Kurdish tribes are an example. Cf. Tas, 'The myth of the Ottoman *millet* system'.

[43] Cf. Joseph R. Hacker, 'Jewish autonomy in the Ottoman Empire: Its scope and limits. Jewish courts from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries', in Avidgor Levy (ed.), *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 1994), 153–202; Najwa Al-Qattan, '*Dhimmī*s in the Muslim court: Legal autonomy and religious discrimination', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxxi, 3 (1999), 429–44; Eugenia Kermeli, 'The right to choice: Ottoman justice vis-à-vis ecclesiastical and communal justice in the Balkans, seventeenth–nineteenth centuries', in Andreas Christmann and Robert Gleave (eds.), *Studies in Islamic law: A festschrift for Colin Imber* (Oxford, 2007), 165–210; Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the realm of the sultans* (Tübingen, 2008), 164–316; Antonis Anastasopoulos, 'Non-Muslims and Ottoman justice(s?)', in Jeroen Duindam, Jill Harries, Caroline Humfress, and Nimrod Hurvitz (eds.), *Law and empire: Ideas, practices, actors* (Leiden, 2013), 275–92.

In short, there was no system of indirect imperial rule over the non-Muslim populations, with religious leaders acting as the interface between their communities and the state, as Barkley claims. It was only in the course of the eighteenth century that institutional arrangements were put in place which can be described as a '*millet* system', although the term was not systematically used until the next century (the most frequent term for referring to a non-Muslim religious community was *ta'ife*, a non-specialized word for any group of people sharing a common trait).[44] It was at the end (and not at the start) of this process, which culminated in the creation of the Jewish chief rabbinate in 1835, that the heads of the three major non-Muslim religious communities (Greek Orthodox, Armenian Gregorian and Jewish) became indeed heads of their 'nations', *milletbaşı*s.[45] Ironically, the ideotype of the *millet* system Barkey describes is better attuned to the long-term aspirations of the patriarchs than to the aims of the sultans.

As to whether the argument that the *millet* system evolved over time makes sense or not in the light of Scott's remarks, as Barkey says, there is hardly any incongruity. *Millet* as a category and an institution was indeed used by the Ottoman state to generate legibility since the last decades of the eighteenth century at the latest, and Scott's insights offer an elegant interpretation of the *millet*ization process that led to the official recognition of no less than twelve Christian *millet*s by the end of the empire.[46] Nonetheless, it does not follow that

---

[44] Cf. Michael Ursinus, 'Zur Diskussion um "*millet*" im Osmanischen Reich', *Südost-Forschungen*, xlviii (1989), 195–207 (esp. 202–6); *idem*, 'Millet', *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vii (Leiden and New York, 1993²), 61–4; *idem*, 'Communautés'; Goffman, 'Ottoman *millet*s'; Konortas, 'From *tâ'ife* to *millet*'; Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab world: The roots of sectarianism* (Cambridge, 2001), 61–5, and also 98–111 for an illuminating account of the eighteenth-century '*millet* wars' between the Orthodox and the Catholics of Syria; Kursar, 'Non-Muslim communal divisions and identities'.

[45] A milestone in this process was the beheading of patriarch Grēgorios V and of other members of the Church hierarchy and of the Orthodox lay elites of the capital as liable for the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821; cf. Eleni Gara and Yorgos Tzedopoulos, *Χριστιανοί και μουσουλμάνοι στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία: Θεσμικές πραγματικότητες και κοινωνικές δυναμικές* (Αθήνα, 2015), 109. Insurrection in the Balkans speeded up the official recognition of a 'Catholic *millet*' in the Arab provinces; cf. Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab world*, 107–8.

[46] The account of Bruce Masters on the formation of the various Christian *millet*s in Syria (*ibidem*, 98–111) is particularly illuminating. By the late nineteenth

the Ottoman state had used that particular way to generate legibility since the emergence of the empire.

A more fruitful approach to the issue, and better attuned to the conclusions of research on the evolvement of the organization and functioning of the *millet*s, is the comparative one adopted by Aylin Koçunyan.[47] Focusing on the institutionalization of the *millet* system in the nineteenth century, Koçunyan connects it to broader "crossimperial trends of centralization and transition to the modern state". She finds close parallels in the timing and modes of reforms aiming at regulating religious diversity in France, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. In her view, the *millet* system was the Ottoman answer to the challenge to rationalize and make more effective the administration of populations who did not share the state religion, at a time when the granting of 'religious freedom' was considered a sign of civilization. Koçunyan notes that in the three imperial contexts she examines, including France, "a certain level of legal pluralism" existed in religious matters, and concludes that "the confessional categorization that has so far been considered a peculiarity of the Ottoman *millet* system and a result of its policy of toleration also existed with some variations in other imperial contexts".[48]

---

century, most *millet*s had become ethnic minorities; cf. Aron Rodrigue, 'From *millet* to minority: Turkish Jewry', in Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (eds.), *Paths of emancipation: Jews, states, and citizenship* (Princeton, 1995), 238–61; Dimitrios Stamatopoulos, 'From *millet*s to minorities in the 19th-century Ottoman Empire: An ambiguous modernization', in Steven G. Ellis, Guðmundur Hálfdanarson, and Ann Katherine Isaacs (eds.), *Citizenship in historical perspective* (Pisa, 2006), 253–73; Dimitris Kamouzis, 'Elites and formation of national identity: The case of the Greek Orthodox *millet* (mid-nineteenth century to 1922)', in Benjamin C. Fortna, Stefanos Katsikas, Dimitris Kamouzis, and Paraskevas Konortas (eds.), *State-nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Turkey: Orthodox and Muslims, 1830–1945* (New York, 2013), 13–46.

[47] Aylin Koçunyan, 'The *millet* system and the challenge of other confessional models, 1856–1865', *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2017), 59–85.

[48] Koçunyan, 'The *millet* system', 70. The remarks of Ussama Makdisi on the 'reinvention' of Mount Lebanon in sectarian terms during the Tanzimat reforms are particularly illuminating in regard to the evolving understandings of *millet*; cf. Ussama Makdisi, *The culture of sectarianism: Community, history and violence in nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2000), 67–95.

III
A STATE OF TOLERANCE

Braude and Lewis did not confine themselves to criticizing the view of the Ottoman Empire as a mosaic world of introvert communities. They also set the frame for a new conceptualization of interreligious relations, manifest in the emblematic subtitle of the edited volumes: *The functioning of a plural society*.

Braude and Lewis described the Ottoman Empire as "a classic example of the plural society", one of those polyethnic and multi-religious societies that "for all their shortcomings" allowed "diverse groups of people to live together with a minimum of bloodshed".[49] They argued that the "Ottoman form of plural coexistence" rested on the twin pillars of tolerance and inequality, which were the legacy of the Islamic legal and political tradition. Islamic tolerance, they explained, consisted in the relative absence of religious persecution, which "was rare and atypical, usually due to specific circumstances". It, however, included discrimination, which "was permanent and indeed necessary, inherent in the system and maintained by both Holy Law and common practice".[50] Christians and Jews were tolerated but were not –and could never become– equal to Muslims. Their subordinate position, maintained by discriminatory regulations, was a consequence of the inequality of believer and unbeliever, one of the three basic inequalities recognized by Islamic doctrine and practice (the other two being master and slave, man and woman).[51]

In spite of Braude and Lewis' critical remarks about the ambivalent nature of religious coexistence in Islamic polities, scholarship building upon the notion of plural society focused rather on tolerance than discrimination. The euphoria arising from the opportunity to demolish the stereotype of Ottoman barbarity and oppression led many scholars to emphasize the positive aspects of the Christian and Jewish experience under Ottoman rule. The shock from the ethnoreligious hatred and the atrocities that accompanied the Yugoslav wars of dissolution in the 1990s also had an impact. The bloodshed that followed the revival of militant nationalism seemed to corroborate Braude

---

[49] Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, 'Introduction', in Braude and Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, i, 1.

[50] *Ibidem*, 3–4.

[51] *Ibidem*, 4.

and Lewis' remark on the relative merits of plural societies. To many, the early modern Ottoman Empire appeared as a haven of plurality, a tolerant society in which different religious communities coexisted peacefully until they fell prey to the sirens of nationalism.

Aron Rodrigue was one of the first to remark in the mid-1990s that, in order to reconceptualize the relationship between the state and its non-Muslim subjects before the nineteenth century, we should move away not only from "the nationalist historiography of the Ottoman yoke" but also from "the historiography of an almost idyllic, harmonious coexistence in the Ottoman Empire". Rodrigue reminded that, alongside acceptance and toleration, there was also discrimination. His understanding of the matter, however, differed from Braude and Lewis's in that he did not attribute the Ottoman attitude toward non-Muslims to the Islamic nature of the empire. In his view, the Islamic tradition provided the discursive framework for the accommodation of religious difference. The crucial element, however, was the fact that difference was an organizing principle of the Ottoman pre-modern society. Rodrigue argued that Ottoman tolerance "was predicated on the notion of the acceptance of difference" and was manifested in the "near lack of any political will to transform the difference into sameness".[52]

By putting the emphasis on the willingness of the Ottoman state to accommodate difference, Rodrigue took the debate on tolerance out of the realm of canon law and brought it into that of imperial politics. Building on his remarks and using empire as analytic framework, Karen Barkey argued more recently that the Ottoman was the *par excellence* 'empire of difference'. Barkey explained that the organization of diversity is a central concern of empires in their effort to achieve longevity, and concluded that the Ottomans found in toleration "the preferred solution to imperial rule over diversity".[53] Barkey made a distinction between tolerance, an attitude, and toleration, a practice,[54] and argued that

> toleration as it developed was a way to qualify and maintain the diversity of the empire, to organize the different communities, to establish peace

---

[52] Aron Rodrigue, 'Difference and tolerance in the Ottoman Empire: An interview with Aron Rodrigue', interview by Nancy Reynolds, *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review*, v, 1 (1996) <https://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/rodrigue.html>.

[53] Barkey, *Empire of difference*, 150.

[54] See, also, *eadem*, 'The Ottomans and toleration', 81–5.

and order, and to ensure the loyalty of these communities, and had little to do with ideals or with a culture of toleration. Toleration is neither equality nor a modern form of "multiculturalism" in the imperial setting. Rather, it is a means of rule, of extending, consolidating, and enforcing state power. Toleration is therefore one among many policies of incorporation such as persecution, assimilation, conversion, or expulsion. I define toleration as a more or less the absence of persecution of a people but not their acceptance into society as full and welcomed members or communities. Toleration refers to the relations among different religious (and ethnic) communities and secular authorities, and is the outcome of networked, negotiated, and pragmatic forms or rule.[55]

Barkey's remarks are particularly useful for putting the non-Muslim experience in perspective. They also help reconsider the ways in which the terms of interreligious coexistence were constantly reshaped in response to the interplay between the exigencies of the state, the aspirations of individuals and the pursuits of local communities or social groups. If the toleration of religious diversity was a way to ensure the imposition and maintenance of imperial rule, and not a religious or moral imperative, then it was not a principle to be realized but a policy to be decided and acted upon; therefore it depended on circumstance, was subject to change and could be withdrawn.[56] From this perspective, there is no incongruence between a general policy of toleration and the sporadic practice of persecution. It is unfortunate that, by linking the Ottoman toleration of the non-Muslims with the concept of the *millet* system, Barkey ends up adopting a static view of interreligious coexistence for the early modern period. That era was not as free from religious strife and persecution, as she assumes,[57] and sectarianism or ethnoreligious violence cannot solely be attributed to the advent of modernity and the disruption of the societal balance of toleration in the nineteenth century.

---

[55] *Eadem, Empire of difference*, 110.

[56] This is also Ussama Makdisi's opinion, cf. Marc Baer, Ussama Makdisi, and Andrew Shryock, 'Tolerance and conversion in the Ottoman Empire: A conversation', [*CSSH* Discussion], *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, li, 4 (2009), 929.

[57] Cf. Karen Barkey, 'Islam and toleration: Studying the Ottoman imperial model', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, xix, 1–2 (2005), 5–19; *eadem, Empire of difference*, 146–50; *eadem*, 'The Ottomans and toleration'.

IV

THE HISTORICAL RECORD

All these conceptual shifts, from oppression to toleration, from the mosaic to the plural society, and from the Islamic tradition to imperial politics, have been attuned to broader trends in history and historiography, and also reflect more general concerns of a political nature.[58] Unsurprisingly, they have all been equally supported by reference to the sources, archival or other. These are extremely diverse given the linguistic and cultural multiplicity of the Ottoman world and European preoccupation with things Ottoman. Besides documents and other archival material produced in the course of state administration, either in the capital or in the provinces, there is also archival material produced by the Churches, the various urban or rural communities and other administrative bodies. There are also legal works, histories and chronicles, geographies, travel accounts, memoirs, diaries, epistles and private writings of all kinds, essays and treatises, literature on religious and moral matters etc. written by and for Ottoman subjects (occasionally also for foreigners) and, of course, corresponding material produced by and for Europeans, as well as diplomatic correspondence, reports by missionaries and spies and so on.[59]

Earlier historiography on Christian and Jewish life under the Ottomans and on interreligious relations mainly utilized non-Turkish material. Not only were documents and narrative sources written in Ottoman Turkish less well known and more difficult to access, but also research was to a large extent conducted by descendants of the various non-Muslim communities now living in national states or in the diaspora. Crossing the linguistic barrier has never been an easy task, even for historians with Orientalist training.[60] Research

---

[58] See also the thoughtful remarks of Bruce Masters on how students of the Ottoman Arab world have been long avoiding the topic of religious identity; cf. *idem*, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab world*, 1–5.

[59] A useful introduction is Suraiya Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman history: An introduction to the sources* (Cambridge, 1999).

[60] Besides Ottoman Turkish, written languages included Arabic, Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, Latin/Romance and Slavic, both in their high forms and the vernaculars, cf. Christine Woodhead, 'Ottoman languages', in *eadem* (ed.), *The Ottoman world*, 143–58; Detrez, 'Pre-national identities'. Given the amount of expertise necessary for approaching the sources, there is a long-standing division of labor: Ottomanists work with Ottoman Turkish and/or Arab sources (in the case of the Arab provinces),

on interreligious relations has often been conducted with incomplete knowledge of the sources and on the basis mainly of chronicles, memoirs, travelogues and other narrative accounts which are more easily accessible and far richer in information than other kinds of material. This, however, has had repercussions on the understanding of the matter. Writings by Christian Ottoman subjects often focus on the limitations and hardships of life, while those by Muslims as a rule ignore non-Muslims altogether. European authors are often biased, in one way or another, and tend to represent Ottoman realities according to their own cultural categories and perceptions. Jewish authors, on the other hand, whether Ottoman subjects or European observers, usually present a more positive picture of living in the Ottoman realm, at least until the crisis of the 1660s. The experience of persecution in Christian Europe, coupled with the conviction that Jews had no option but to live under gentile rule, have had a long-lasting influence on Jewish perceptions of the Ottomans.

It is not by coincidence that the 'discovery' of Ottoman archival material became a veritable turning point for research in interreligious relations.[61] By the late 1970s, Ronald Jennings had already revealed a world of intense interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims through his pioneer research on the seventeenth-century sharia court records of Kayseri.[62] In the next decades, scholars started looking more closely into everyday life and the lived experience of Ottoman subjects, shifting their gaze from the more confrontational to the more symbiotic aspects of interreligious coexistence. A series of empirical studies based on sharia court records (*kadı sicilleri*) from all over the Ottoman Empire provided archival support for the concept of a plural society resting upon a condition of peaceful coexistence. Scholars working in this line of research found no evidence of either

---

whereas historians in the fields of Armenian, Greek, Jewish, Slavic etc. studies work with sources written in the respective languages. In the last decades there are more Ottomanists working also with non-Ottoman sources.

[61] For the importance of Ottoman sources, cf. Halil İnalcık, 'Ottoman archival materials on *millets*', in Braude and Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, i, 437–49; Amnon Cohen, 'Ottoman sources for the history of Ottoman Jews: How important?', in Levy, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 687–704.

[62] Ronald C Jennings, '*Zimmis* (non-Muslims) in early 17th century Ottoman judicial records: The sharia court of Anatolian Kayseri', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, xxi, 3 (1978), 225–93.

endemic intercommunal hostility or abusive behavior targeting non-Muslims in the early modern centuries. They found themselves instead in front of complex patterns of religious intermixing, with limited segregation and a variety of interaction that included commercial partnerships, credit networks, property transactions and communal deliberations.[63] In short, scholarly research revealed a society that functioned despite internal divisions, and legal institutions that, if the documents were to be believed, were concerned with ensuring equity and safeguarding social peace.

Peaceful coexistence, however, does not preclude antagonism or strife. After all, the concept of Ottoman oppression had also been supported by the testimony of the sources. From a methodological point of view, information from the Ottoman archives may broaden the picture and show the complexity of interreligious interaction, but does not invalidate information from other sources nor makes it obsolete. Despite the tendency to consider documents produced by state authorities as more 'neutral' or 'objective' than other kinds of textual evidence, they also have limitations and biases and are no less mediative of conditions on the ground than ego-documents, chronicles, travel accounts or saints' *vitae*.

Because of their concern with the trivial and the everyday, sharia court records have been routinely regarded as giving a better sense of the conditions on the ground in relation to other types of sources which record the unusual and the remarkable. But are they really as trustworthy as we would like them to be? The sharia court records emanate a rather suspicious picture of social tranquillity. How certain are we that the low level of incidents of interreligious and/or intercommunal tensions they record is reflective of the general climate of social

---

[63] Cf. Amnon Cohen, *Jewish life under Islam: Jerusalem in the sixteenth century* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); Ronald C. Jennings, *Christians and Muslims in Ottoman Cyprus and the Mediterranean world, 1571–1640* (New York, 1993); Kemal Çiçek, 'Living together: Muslim-Christian relations in eighteenth-century Cyprus as reflected by the *sharīʿa* court records', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, iv, 1 (1993), 36–64; Rossitsa Gradeva, 'Orthodox Christians in the kadi courts: The practice of the Sofia *sheriat* court, seventeenth century', *Islamic Law and Society*, iv, 1 (1996), 37–69; Gara, 'In search of communities'; Haim Gerber, 'Muslims and *zimmi*s in Ottoman economy and society: Encounters, culture, and knowledge', in Raul Motika, Christoph Herzog, and Michael Ursinus (eds.), *Studies in Ottoman social and economic life* (Heidelberg, 1999), 99–124; Al-Qattan, '*Dhimmī*s in the Muslim court'; Molly Greene, *A shared world: Christians and Muslims in the early modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, 2000).

relations in a given time and place and not due to a bias inherent in this type of sources? Both are equally possible.[64] We must not forget that murder, riots or other 'public outrages' against non-Muslims, to use the words of Bruce Masters, "were only rarely brought to court, due in no small part to the invalidation of non-Muslim testimony against Muslims in cases where a penalty might result".[65]

In my experience, sharia court records are rather opaque sources, and their superficial accessibility and wealth of information can be very deceptive. As many scholars have already noticed, the Ottoman *kadı* courts did not engage in any kind of systematic record keeping, therefore large areas of social and economic life are simply absent from record. Most importantly, judges and court scribes were concerned with producing documents that conformed to the stipulations of the Islamic law, and did not include information beyond what was absolutely necessary. This is also true in the case of episodes of social tension or intercommunal strife, the recording of which is often almost cryptic.[66] In short, sharia court records provide important but partial insights which must be supplemented through the use of other material such as imperial rescripts to petitions (*mühimme* and *ahkâm defterleri*) and registers of complaints (*şikayet defterleri*).

Taken together, the sources of the Ottoman period do not give a uniform picture of interreligious relations. Alongside tolerance and cooperation, there is also hostility and distrust; and in spite of peaceful coexistence, time and again we see formerly friendly neighbors to turn on each other violently. This is hardly surprising, of course. In the past, as now, social relations of any kind did not remain static but

---

[64] Cf. Antonis Anastasopoulos, 'Οι χριστιανοί στην Τουρκοκρατία και οι οθωμανικές πηγές: Η περίπτωση της Βέροιας, π. 1760–1770', *Αριάδνη*, ix (2003), 71–89. See, also, Dror Ze'evi, 'The use of Ottoman sharia court records as a source for Middle Eastern social history: A reappraisal', *Islamic Law and Society*, v, 1 (1998), 35–56.

[65] Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab world*, 31. For a discussion of the broader issue of who went to court against whom and why, see Metin Coşgel and Boğaç Ergene, *The economics of Ottoman justice: Settlement and trial in the sharia courts* (Cambridge, 2016).

[66] For examples, see: Eleni Gara, 'Neomartyr without a message', *Archivum Ottomanicum*, xxiii (2005/6), 155–75; *eadem*, 'Popular protest and the limitations of sultanic justice', in *eadem*, M. Erdem Kabadayı and Christoph K. Neumann (eds.), *Popular protest and political participation in the Ottoman Empire*: *Studies in honor of Suraiya Faroqhi* (Istanbul, 2011), 89–104.

were constantly negotiated and reshaped in the field of everyday life. For many Ottoman subjects, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, living together with religious others was a fact of life they would gladly dispense with if they only could.[67] Even though Muslims, Christians and Jews lived side by side in peace most of the time, and probably took care to uphold a modicum of good relations by showing respect and discretion toward religious others, the balance was in many cases frail and social tranquillity could easily be disturbed. We know of the most violent manifestations of religious strife because of the traces they have left in various sources; but there may have been other, smaller crises, which have not been recorded and have fallen out of memory.

The historical record offers evidence for tolerance as well as bigotry, oppression as well as equity, humiliation as well as respect. As Antonis Anastasopoulos remarks, if we want to draw a balanced and nuanced picture of interreligious relations, we must take into consideration that the terms of coexistence were not uniform, neither in space nor in time.[68] The systemic toleration cultivated by the central state shaped the framework that enabled coexistence in local societies but did not dictate its character. In order to better understand the extent and forms of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, including religious violence, we must focus on the specific social and cultural conditions that promoted, or conversely limited, tolerance of the religious others in particular environments. We must pay more attention to the social makeup of the population in mixed localities and to changes in the course of time, and not treat religious communities as undifferentiated entities. Anecdotal evidence points to differential patterns of interaction; it is worth exploring it in detail with respect to different social groups and different milieus of sociality. Last but not least, we must take into consideration that the position of non-Muslims and the dynamics of interreligious relations in the Arab provinces, where Christians and Jews had been reduced to numerical and social minorities long before the Ottoman conquest, differed perceptively from the rest of the empire.[69]

---

[67] Cf. Anastasopoulos, 'Non-Muslims and Ottoman justice(s?)', 291.

[68] *Ibidem*, 277.

[69] For an account of interreligious relations centred on the Arab provinces, see Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab world*, esp. 31–7; from a Balkan and Aegean perspective, see Gara and Tzedopoulos, *Χριστιανοί και μουσουλμάνοι*, esp. 120–48.

V

BEYOND TOLERATION

The last decade has witnessed an increase in studies that move beyond the debate of tolerance vs. intolerance. Such works, which are informed by theoretical considerations and use comparative approaches, examine interreligious relations in the early modern centuries in the light of broader developments, and regard Europe and the Middle East as a 'trans-imperial space'. The 'imperial turn', by now a clearly discernible trend in Ottoman Studies,[70] offers possibilities for comparative and integrative approaches that can help us find new interpretations in regard to the accommodation, governance and experience of religious difference in imperial contexts. Much of this research is part of a general reconceptualization of the Ottoman society as an early modern one, and converses with current revisions of the relationship between the Christian European and the Ottoman world.[71] Recent work on members of European 'nations' living in Ottoman cities, on renegades, diplomats and other 'go-betweens' highlights the density of interconnectedness between Muslims and non-Muslims, Ottomans and Europeans, the porousness of religious, ethnic and linguistic boundaries, the multiplicity of allegiances and the complexity of interreligious interaction.[72]

---

[70] Cf. Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, 'The Ottoman Empire and the imperial turn', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, liv, 4 (2012), 721–45.

[71] Cf. Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002); Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the world around it* (London, 2004); Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The age of beloveds: Love and the beloved in early-modern Ottoman and European culture and society* (Durham and London, 2005); Virginia Aksan and Daniel Goffman (eds.), *The early modern Ottomans: Remapping the empire* (Cambridge, 2007); Anna Contadini and Claire Norton (eds.), *The Renaissance and the Ottoman world* (Farnham, 2013); Pascal W. Firges, Tobias P. Graf, Christian Roth, and Gülay Tulasoğlu (eds.), *Well-connected domains: Towards an entangled Ottoman history* (Leiden and Boston, 2014).

[72] Cf. Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, identity, and coexistence in the early modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, 2006); *idem, Renegade women: Gender, identity, and boundaries in the early modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, 2011); E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering empire: Trans-imperial subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca and London, 2012); Viviana Tagliaferri, 'In the process of being Levantines: The "Levantinization" of the Catholic community of Izmir (1683–1724)', *Turkish Historical Review*, vii, 1 (2016), 86–112; Tobias P. Graf, *The sultan's renegades: Christian-European converts to Islam and the making of the Ottoman elite, 1575–1610* (Oxford, 2017).

The notions of tolerance/toleration and coexistence have come increasingly under scrutiny and scholars are struggling to redefine them in ways that are appropriate to Ottoman realities. A discussion from 2009 between Ussama Makdisi and Marc Baer is illustrative of the efforts for more nuanced interpretations. Makdisi understands toleration as an imperial strategy that can be withdrawn for various reasons, and defines coexistence as "a state of being in which different communities … recognize and adapt to the inevitability of difference".[73] Baer, on the other hand, finds coexistence "the wrong term" for describing intercommunal relations in the early modern Ottoman Empire because it "suggests equality between groups", and prefers the notion of tolerance albeit with certain modifications:

> Tolerance appears to me as a more useful concept, but only when two conditions are met. First, we need to include a notion of power. Tolerance is based on a state of inequality in which the most powerful party (such as the ruler) decides whether a less powerful group can exist or not and to what extent members of that group are allowed to manifest their difference. A regime can discriminate against certain groups while tolerating their being different. … The second condition for using the concept of tolerance is to make sure our definition is not limited to how a regime treats minorities.[74]

Words come with a baggage and confusion is unavoidable if their meaning is not clearly defined. But if the notions of tolerance and coexistence are inadequate because they obscure the workings of inequality and power, how can we describe the modalities of intercommunal interaction in the Ottoman Empire of the *ancien régime*?

The concept of 'intercommunality', used by Nicholas Doumanis for analyzing practices of mutual respect, cooperation, communal living and observance of boundaries in the religiously mixed towns and villages of late Ottoman Anatolia,[75] could under conditions be

---

[73] Baer, Makdisi, and Shryock, 'Tolerance and conversion in the Ottoman Empire', 929.

[74] *Ibidem*, 930.

[75] "[Intercommunality] refers to the accommodation of difference between cultural, ethnic, or religious communities that happened to occupy the same street, neighbourhood, village, or rural environ. These living arrangements were conducted in a spirit of neighbourliness, and underscored by routine practices, social bonds and shared values." Nicholas Doumanis, *Before the nation: Muslim-Christian coexistence and its destruction in late Ottoman Anatolia* (Oxford, 2013), 1–2.

a fruitful approach for the symbiotic aspects of everyday coexistence in the early modern centuries as well. Another concept that could be of use, this time for understanding religious strife, is that of 'antagonistic tolerance', proposed by the social anthropologist Robert Hayden. Originally referring to the competitive sharing of sacred sites in contemporary religiously mixed societies, it has since been elaborated with the aim to explain how peoples of different religions, who live peacefully side by side for generations and may have even developed syncretistic practices, come to engage in religious strife and violence.[76] Hayden's remark that "coexistence may be a matter of competition between members of different groups manifesting the negative definition of tolerance as passive noninterference and premised on a lack of ability of either group to overcome the other" is certainly worth considering also for Ottoman contexts.[77]

The concept of *convivencia*, borrowed from the historiography of medieval Iberia, has also been recently used, albeit in a derivative work by a non-Ottomanist scholar.[78] Given how heavily the notion has been criticized,[79] it is unlikely that it will ever gain currency among Ottomanists. More recently, Baki Tezcan proposed to consider interreligious relations based on the principle of 'convenience' or *conveniencia* (as opposed to *convivencia*), taking inspiration from the work of the Iberianist scholar Brian Catlos. Catlos has argued that religious coexistence in medieval Aragon was predicated on the utility of Muslims and Jews to Christians, and was ensured by a system of reciprocal interests and utilitarian arrangements subject to constant negotiation.[80] Tezcan

---

[76] Robert Hayden, 'Antagonistic tolerance: Competitive sharing of religious sites in South Asia and the Balkans', *Current Anthropology*, xliii, 2 (2002), 205–19; Robert M. Hayden *et al.*, *Antagonistic tolerance: Competitive sharing of religious sites and spaces* (London and New York, 2016).

[77] Hayden, 'Antagonistic tolerance', 206.

[78] Elena Brambilla, '*Convivencia* under Muslim rule: The island of Cyprus since the Ottoman conquest (1571–1640)', in Elena Brambilla, Sabine Deschler-Erb, Jean-Luc Lamboley, Aleksey Klemeshov, and Giovanni Moretto (eds.), *Routines of existence: Time, life and afterlife in society and religion* (Pisa, 2009), 12–29.

[79] Cf. Maya Soifer, 'Beyond *convivencia*: Critical reflections on the historiography of interfaith relations in Christian Spain', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, i, 1 (2009), 19–35.

[80] Brian Catlos, 'Contexto y conveniencia en la corona de Aragón: Propuesta de un modelo de interacción entre grupos etno-religiosos minoritarios y mayoritarios', *Revista d'Història Medieval*, xii (2001–2), 259–68.

finds that Catlos' model provides a productive alternative to "the moralizing narratives of tolerance vs. intolerance, or such grand notions as the clash of civilizations", although its application in the Ottoman context requires several modifications "to allow for ethnic diversity within religious communities and to allow more room for politics, both internal and international".[81]

> Most obviously, it removes religious labels from the historical analysis and provides us with a model that works in multiple contexts with different majority and minority groups. However, a much more significant advantage offered by this model is the possibility of integrating socio-economic issues into intercommunal relations, and even of assigning primacy to them in explaining change.[82]

In my view, Tezcan's recasting of interreligious relations in terms of 'convenience' does not really provide a better understanding of the issue, although it has the merit to assign agency to the Ottoman subjects as well, not only to the state. On the contrary, his account of how the position of the non-Muslims and their relationship to the Ottoman state and their Muslim compatriots changed from the seventeenth century onwards, in response to the consolidation of new Ottoman Muslim identities and the emergence of a Muslim 'political nation', is especially insightful and thought-provoking.[83]

## VI
## OTTOMAN CONFESSIONALIZATION

The most interesting recent development is the introduction by Tijana Krstić of the notion of 'Ottoman confessionalization'. In her ground-breaking work, Krstić argued that the Ottomans participated in a trans-imperial and trans-religious 'age of confessionalisation' that encompassed not only Catholic and Protestant Europe but also the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, giving rise to the formation of Sunni and Shi'a Muslim 'confessional and territorial blocks'.[84] Krstić

---

[81] Tezcan, 'Ethnicity, race, religion and social class', 160.

[82] *Ibidem*, 165.

[83] *Ibidem*, 165–7.

[84] Tijana Krstić, 'Illuminated by the light of Islam and the glory of the Ottoman sultanate: Self-narratives of conversion to Islam in the age of confessionalization',

pointed out that the Ottoman Muslim confessionalization, far from being merely a parallel development, shared a common conceptual framework with the Catholic and Protestant ones, and was partly mediated by Christian converts to Islam. She further argued that the process of confessionalization unfolded in two stages:

> [I]n the sixteenth century confession building in the Ottoman Empire was a predominantly top-down process presided over by the sultan and his advisers, especially in the era of Sultan Süleyman (1520–1566). The situation changed in the seventeenth century when new initiatives for religious reform and definition of 'orthodoxy' began to be articulated 'from below' in reaction to profound social, political, and economic transformation the empire was undergoing.[85]

Krstić was of course not the first scholar to point out the changes in the understanding of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the late 2000s, a growing corpus of research on the persecution of Ottoman Shiites, on the one hand, and on the fundamentalist Kadızadeli movement, on the other, made sufficiently clear that those two centuries had been pivotal to the 'Sunnitization' of the Ottoman Empire. A series of distinct, yet evidently interconnected developments had affected not only the understanding of faith, religious identity and difference, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but also the practice of imperial rule, which had become increasingly infused by religious rhetoric and had included measures aiming at social disciplining and consolidating Sunni orthodoxy.[86] By interpreting the changing

---

*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, li, 1 (2009), 35–63; *eadem, Contested conversions to Islam: Narratives of religious change in the early modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2011), esp. 12–16.

[85] Krstić, 'Illuminated by the light of Islam', 40–1.

[86] Cf. C.H. Imber, 'The persecution of the Ottoman Shī'ites according to the mühimme defterleri, 1565–1585', *Der Islam*, lvi, 2 (1979), 245–73; Madeline Zilfi, 'The Kadızadelis: Discordant revivalism in seventeenth-century Istanbul', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, xlv, 4 (1986), 251–69; *eadem, Politics of piety: The Ottoman ulema in the postclassical age (1600–1800)* (Minneapolis, MN, 1988); Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, 'Les réactions socio-religieuses contre l'idéologie officielle ottomane et la question de *zendeqa ve ilḥâd* (hérésie et athéisme) au XVIe siècle', *Turcica*, xxiii [xxi–xxiii] (1991), 71–82; Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, 'Qızılbash "heresy" and rebellion in Ottoman Anatolia during the sixteenth century', *Anatolia Moderna*, vii (1997), 1–15; Nabil Al-Tikriti, '*Kalam* in the service of the state: Apostasy and the defining of Ottoman Islamic identity', in Hakan Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski (eds.), *Legitimizing*

attitudes toward religion, identity and governance as manifesta-
tions of an Ottoman process of confessionalization, Krstić created
a framework that allows to contextualize and analyze from a common
perspective both top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives. That
is why, despite Marc Baer's harsh criticism of her use of the term
'confessionalization', a concept he does not consider applicable in
the case of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires,[87] the proposition of
Krstić quickly found resonance among several scholars. All the more
so since it offers a comparative perspective, to which not even Baer is
averse, given that he has also drawn parallels between the Kadızadelis
and Christian Reformists, especially the Puritans.[88]

   In a recent article, Nabil al-Tikriti argued that Ottoman confes-
sionalization had its beginnings in the particular conjuncture of
the early sixteenth century: the confrontation with the rising Safavid
dynasty that challenged Ottoman rule in Eastern Anatolia, on the one
hand, and the conquest of the Mamluk Empire that turned Muslim
populations into numerical majority, on the other. Al-Tikriti writes
that these two developments "forced Ottoman elites to clarify what
their empire stood for politically, religiously, and socially", and set in
motion a "broader transition from individual to institutional modes of
piety, and from imperial ambivalence concerning individual religious
identity to state-supported orthopraxy".[89]

   The formation of an imperial 'Ottoman Islam' in the course of
the sixteenth century redefined non-Muslim inequality and subordina-
tion, and as a result modified the terms of interreligious coexistence.
The change was more acutely perceived in the course of the seventeenth

---

*the order: Ottoman rhetoric of state power* (Leiden, 2005), 131–49; Marc David Baer,
*Honored by the glory of Islam: Conversion and conquest in Ottoman Europe* (Oxford, 2008).

   [87] See his review of Tijana Krstić's *Contested conversions to Islam* in *Journal of
Islamic Studies*, xxiii, 3 (2012), 391–4.

   [88] Baer, Makdisi, and Shryock, 'Tolerance and conversion in the Ottoman Empire',
933. Another scholar who has drawn such parallels is Marinos Sariyannis, 'The
Kadızadeli movement as a social and political phenomenon: The rise of a "mercantile
ethic"?', in Antonis Anastasopoulos (ed.), *Political initiatives 'from the bottom up' in
the Ottoman Empire* (Rethymno, 2012), 263–89 (presented as a conference paper
in 2009).

   [89] Nabil Al-Tikriti, 'Ibn-i Kemal's confessionalism and the construction of an
Ottoman Islam', in Christine Isom-Verhaaren and Kent F. Schull (eds.), *Living
in the Ottoman realm: Empire and identity, 13th to 20th centuries* (Bloomington, IN,
and Indianapolis, IN, 2016), 97–8.

century, when the dynasty and many among the ruling elite embraced the tenets of the fundamentalist Kadızadeli movement. Marc Baer has demonstrated how the active, indeed aggressive, promotion of conversion and the pursuit of conquest became distinct traits of Mehmed IV's reign (1648–87), resulting in a wave of Islamization not only of people but also of space.[90] It is no coincidence that this particular time witnessed also a peak in trials for apostasy, in tandem with the legal elaboration of rules of inclusion and exclusion in regard to the Muslim community.[91]

This is not the place to discuss the relative merits of the concept of confessionalization, which is admittedly contested and has been subject to various modifications in its long career in Europeanist historiography.[92] I must say, however, that I find the notion of 'Ottoman confessionalization' very useful, not only as conceptual device for interpreting the changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but also for two additional reasons: because it opens up new paths for comparative and integrative research, and helps move away from

---

[90] Baer, *Honored by the glory of Islam*. See also: *idem*, 'The great fire of 1660 and the Islamization of Christian and Jewish space in Istanbul', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxxvi, 2 (2004), 159–81; 'Death in the Hippodrome: Sexual politics and legal culture in the reign of Mehmet IV', *Past and Present*, ccx, 1 (2011), 61–91.

[91] Cf. Marinos Sariyannis, 'Aspects of "neomartyrdom": Religious contacts, "blasphemy" and "calumny" in 17th-century Istanbul', *Archivum Ottomanicum*, xxiii (2005/6), 249–62; Yorgos Tzedopoulos, *Ορθόδοξοι νεομάρτυρες στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία: Η συγκρότηση της πρακτικής και της ερμηνείας του ομολογιακού θανάτου*, PhD thesis, University of Athens, 2012, 223–75; Derin Terzioğlu, 'Sufis in the age of state-building and confessionalization', in Woodhead (ed.), *The Ottoman world*, 86–99; Guy Burak, 'Faith, law and empire in the Ottoman "age of confessionalization" (fifteenth-seventeenth centuries): The case of "renewal of faith"', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, xxviii, 1 (2013), 1–23; Simeon Evstatiev, 'The Qāḍīzādeli movement and the revival of takfir in the Ottoman age', in Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro, and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Accusations of unbelief in Islam: A diachronic perspective on takfīr* (Leiden and Boston, 2016), 213–43; Al-Tikriti, 'Ibn-i Kemal's confessionalism'.

[92] Cf. Ute Lotz-Heumann, 'The concept of confessionalization: A historiographical paradigm in dispute', *Memoria y Civilización*, iv (2001), 93–114; Thomas A. Brady, 'Confessionalization: The career of a concept', in John M. Headley, Hans J. Hillerbrand, and Anthony J. Papalas (eds.), *Confessionalization in Europe, 1555–1700: Essays in honor and memory of Bodo Nischan* (Aldershot, 2004), 1–20; Jörg Deventer, '"Confessionalisation" – a useful theoretical concept for the study of religion, politics, and society in early modern east-central Europe?', *European Review of History*, xi, 3 (2004), 403–25.

the simplistic dichotomy of tolerant state vs. bigot local societies; and, most importantly, because it demonstrates that the understanding of religious identity and the administration of religious difference was subject to change, and that developments within the Muslim confessional community could have repercussions for interreligious relations at large.

## VII
## CONCLUSION

Conceptions about the position of the non-Muslims and the nature and forms of interreligious relations in the Ottoman Empire have changed perceptively over the last half century. The mosaic world of subjugated nations and self-governed *millet*s that lived parallel and distinct lives gave its place, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, to the plural society of extensive interreligious interaction at individual or communal level. In tandem came the shift from an emphasis on the oppression of the non-Muslims to that on toleration. We are now in a new phase of revision which focuses on the forms, extent and limits of toleration and intercommunal interaction, and pays close attention to change over time.

The international historiography cultivated by Ottomanist historians has traditionally privileged state-centred approaches that give priority to the concerns and pursuits of the imperial centre and the ruling elites. For most of the twentieth century, research on interreligious relations in the field of Ottoman Studies focused on the status of the non-Muslims within the Ottoman institutional and legal order, and investigated the attitudes of the central state *vis-à-vis* Christians and Jews. National historiographies, on the contrary, despite their limitations, focus on the subjects instead of the state and thus bring to the fore subaltern experiences and points of view. Ignoring their insights has cost Ottomanist scholarship the loss of much ground which must now be covered.

Top-down perspectives focus on the attitudes of the dynasty and the Ottoman ruling elites toward religious multiplicity, on legal elaborations of the position of the non-Muslim subjects and the Christian Churches, on the institutional aspects of interreligious relations, on the regulation of religious coexistence etc. When approaching the issue from a bottom-up perspective, interest shifts to how local societies

or social groups, individuals or communities, experienced religious multiplicity and shaped confessional identities in relation to religious others, how they were affected by legal and institutional changes or governmental policies and reacted to changing conditions of coexistence and so on. Current research continues to be mainly concerned with state policies and formal elaborations of religious identity, but it increasingly engages also with the study of interreligious relations in other contexts and from bottom-up perspectives.

We are going through a time of transition, with scholars putting under scrutiny accepted wisdoms, revisiting established paradigms and looking for new approaches. A consensus appears to be currently building around the concept of 'Ottoman confessionalization', but more research is needed in order to better understand the formation of confessional identities and their impact on interreligious relations. The next step should be a thorough critique of the *dhimma* paradigm which I have long considered misleading.[93] One of the ramifications of recent research is that, by showing how new notions of non-Muslim subjecthood were constructed in parallel with the formation of a Sunni Ottoman identity, it has practically discredited the undifferentiated understanding of the non-Muslim subjects as *zimmi*s.

It is impossible to generalize on the ease or suffering of non-Muslims' life or on the symbiotic or conflicting nature of their relations with Muslims. Indeed, this is the wrong question to ask. Social relations are dynamic and are constantly negotiated and reshaped. Religious identity is one of the factors influencing their formation; no doubt very important, since the Ottoman social and political order was organized on the basis of religious difference, but by far not the only one. Social class and status are also crucial factors, as well as the demographic makeup of mixed towns and localities. The dynamics of intercommunal interaction differed greatly between the imperial capital and the provinces, the Balkans and the Middle East, Western and Eastern Anatolia, and so on. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that the ports and commercial cities, which

---

[93] Eleni Gara, 'Χριστιανοί και μουσουλμάνοι στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία των πρώιμων νεότερων χρόνων: Ιστοριογραφικές προσεγγίσεις', introduction to the Greek edition of Molly Greene, *A shared world: Christians and Muslims in the early modern Mediterranean* (*Κρήτη: Ένας κοινός κόσμος. Χριστιανοί και μουσουλμάνοι στη Μεσόγειο των πρώιμων νεότερων χρόνων*, trad. Eleni Gara, Themis Gekou [Αθήνα, 2005]), 25–8.

were the *par excellence* hubs of plurality and intense interreligious interaction, were also the most frequent *loci* of episodes of intolerance and religious strife.[94] Aphorisms of one kind or the other in respect to interreligious relations ignore their dynamic nature and present them as static and consolidated. If we succumb to them, we lose from sight what we are supposed to look for: how the Ottoman subjects, Muslims, Christians and Jews, experienced, interpreted and reacted to the challenges of coexistence under the Ottoman *ancien régime*, with its particular blend of religious toleration and institutional inequality; and how coexistence, whether symbiotic or confrontational, with or without traits of neighborliness, intercommunality or antagonistic tolerance, was constantly in the making and not merely a condition that was reproduced from one generation to another.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anastasopoulos Antonis, 'Non-Muslims and Ottoman justice(s?)', in Jeroen Duindam, Jill Harries, Caroline Humfress, and Nimrod Hurvitz (eds.), *Law and empire: Ideas, practices, actors* (Leiden, 2013), 275–92.

Baer Marc David, *Honored by the glory of Islam: Conversion and conquest in Ottoman Europe* (Oxford, 2008).

Baer Marc, Ussama Makdisi, and Andrew Shryock, 'Tolerance and conversion in the Ottoman Empire: A conversation', [*CSSH* Discussion], *Comparative Studies in Society and History* li, 4 (2009), 927–40.

Braude Benjamin and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The functioning of a plural society*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1982).

Gara Eleni and Yorgos Tzedopoulos, *Χριστιανοί και μουσουλμάνοι στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία: Θεσμικές πραγματικότητες και κοινωνικές δυναμικές* (Αθήνα, 2015).

Gradeva Rossitsa, 'Apostasy in Rumeli in the middle of the sixteenth century', *Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies*, xxii (2000), 29–73.

Greene Molly, *A shared world: Christians and Muslims in the early modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, 2000).

Jennings Ronald C, 'Zimmis (non-Muslims) in early 17th century Ottoman judicial records: The sharia court of Anatolian Kayseri', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* xxi, 3 (1978), 225–93.

Kermeli Eugenia, 'The right to choice: Ottoman justice vis-à-vis ecclesiastical and communal justice in the Balkans, seventeenth-nineteenth centuries', in

---

[94] Yorgos Tzedopoulos, 'Συνύπαρξη και ανταγωνισμός στην Σμύρνη του 17ου αιώνα: Ο διαμφισβητούμενος τόπος του μαρτυρίου', in Ioannis Karachristos and Paraskevas Potiropoulos (eds.), *Σμύρνη: Η ανάπτυξη μιας μητρόπολης της ανατολικής Μεσογείου, 17ος αιώνας – 1922* (Αθήνα, 2016), 196–9.

Andreas Christmann and Robert Gleave (eds.), *Studies in Islamic law: A festschrift for Colin Imber* (Oxford, 2007), 165–210.

Kołodziejczyk Dariusz, 'The "Turkish yoke" revisited: The Ottoman non-Muslim subjects between loyalty, alienation, and riot', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 93 (2006), 177–95.

Konortas Paraskevas, *Οθωμανικές θεωρήσεις για το Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο, 17ος – αρχές 20ού αιώνα* (Αθήνα, 1998).

Krstić Tijana, *Contested conversions to Islam: Narratives of religious change in the early modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2011).

Levy Avidgor (ed.), *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 1994).

Masters Bruce, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab world: The roots of sectarianism* (Cambridge, 2001).

Papademetriou Tom, *Render unto the sultan: Power, authority, and the Greek Orthodox Church in the early Ottoman centuries* (Oxford, 2015).

Al-Qattan Najwa, '*Dhimmī*s in the Muslim court: Legal autonomy and religious discrimination', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxxi, 3 (1999), 429–44.

Rodrigue Aron, 'Difference and tolerance in the Ottoman Empire: An interview with Aron Rodrigue', interview by Nancy Reynolds, *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review*, v, 1 (1996) <https://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/rodrigue.html>.

Tezcan Baki, 'Ethnicity, race, religion and social class: Ottoman markers of difference', in Christine Woodhead (ed.), *The Ottoman world* (London and New York, 2012), 159–70.

Ursinus Michael, 'Communautés', in François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein (eds.), *Dictionnaire de l'empire Ottoman* (Paris, 2015), 280–3.

Zachariadou Elisabeth A., *Δέκα τουρκικά έγγραφα για την Μεγάλη Εκκλησία (1483–1567)* (Αθήνα, 1996).

**Eleni Gara** – early modern history of the Balkans; assistant professor at the Department of Social Anthropology and History, University of the Aegean in Mytilene, Greece; e-mail: egara@sa.aegean.gr