
Ottomans' Treatment with other Religious Communities: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Vast empires have diversity and complexity of culture in terms of religion and ethnicity. This diversity may be problematic in developing social bonds. Loyalty to state may also become betrayal. Addressing such issues, endeavors have to be made, both at government and social level. Fascinated by the government policy, a strong social fraternity may be generated. The rulers' mind set is manifested in their behavior towards other religious and ethnic groups. Ottomans inspired by the Islamic teachings formulated policies to develop mutual co-existence in the areas under their control. Successful functioning of a state stretched in three continents was through mutual coordination among the communal entities. The regime outlived for more than six centuries with all this diversity. This could be possible by the confidence of all sections of the society in their ruling regime. The article underlines the social ties as well as official policies towards all factions of the Ottoman establishment.

Keywords: *Mutual Co-existence, Dhimmīs, Sate, Millet, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Devshirme.*

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Introduction

Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) despite of being multi-cultural, multi-religious and pluralistic society of diversified ethnicity, extending in the three continents of the world thrived for more than six centuries. This long survival could be possible, if various factions would have been in a state of harmony, peace and strong social bonds. The people of three Semitic religions of the world were among its subjects, the Muslims being the largest, the second were the Christians and then the Jews. Harmony has its bases in tolerance, which emanates from the ideology prevalent among the masses. This harmony was due to the tolerant behavior of both the ruling class and common populace. This forbearance was prevalent in all strata of life. People in daily business had acceptability for the people of other religions. The rulers had formulated such policies that the rights of minorities were preserved. peace and harmony prevailed in all parts of the state. The people not only respected other religions and religious communities but also helped them, participated in festivals and gatherings of other religions. Independence of thought and action was provided to various religious minorities by the Ottomans. They had not only the freedom to construct their religious places rather the government encouraged them and helped them. Non-Muslims were the part of government officials, not only the local but the foreigners belonging to other religions had full freedom to carry out their missionary activities. No forced conversion was there. However, the excellent character of Osmanlis was sufficient to sensitize the non-Muslims for their conversion to Islam. The Ottoman behavior has its bases in Prophetic agreements like Pact of Madīnah¹, with the Christians of Najrān² and even his participation in the treaty of Ḥalf al-Fuḍūl³. The Prophet (peace be upon him) had the urge to abide by Ḥalf al-Fuḍūl during his Madinan period if someone would have called him for that⁴. The Prophet (peace be upon him) approved that no destruction would be brought to the worship places of the 'People of Book' and likewise was the conduct of caliph Umar with the 'People of Ela'⁵. The Ottomans followed the same line of action regarding their non Muslim populace. The main features of the society can be highlighted under the following main headings:

1. State and Official Behaviour
2. Individual and Public attitude

Official Treatment with Other Religions:

Having a large variety in terms of religion and ethnicity, there arose the problems of various types. To overcome these, the Ottomans, constantly formulated the policies. So, the Ottomans formulated policies balancing its religious problems. In this context they established religious institutions through "legally valid" organizations by imposing regulations over them but Islam was predominant, and none could be a critic of Islam or the Sultan. Death may be the fate of such people.

Ottomans' Treatment with other Religious Communities

Under the Ottomans, the whole community was divided into various stratas i.e. Millet system. Each religious community was united into one millet, e.g. Christian Millet, Jewish Millet etc. Each millet had its own schools, courts and other community places. Because of this, all communities enjoyed autonomy in their communal affairs. They had the full right to practice their religion, subject to certain conditions and had an ensured security and safety.⁶

In the beginning, though it was decreed that various communities will use specific identification signs, colours i.e. the colour of turban and shoe, perhaps it was an administrative need for identification. But practically, it was never accepted by the society.⁷

Church under the Ottoman Regime:

The Prophet (peace be upon him) concluded an agreement with the Christians of Najran and declared that their churches have the sanctity.⁸ No destruction will be brought to the worship places. Similar was the attitude of Umar who provided recognition and protection to the 'People of Book' in Ela.⁹

In any multi religious society, the religious places are a matter of great concern. Religious leadership, if in harmony with the sitting government, the whole society will bear harmonic bonds, as religion is the most effective force in human life. Because of this feeling, the Ottomans developed close ties with the church. They retained its structure under their control until the independence war of the Greeks (1821-1831) and, early 20th century. All churches were kept under the sovereignty of the Greek Orthodox Church. It portrays that the churches were under the control of their own religious leadership.

Conversion:

Conversion is the most debatable issue in pluralistic societies. Islam is very emphatic in this aspect by saying لا اكره فى الدين (There shall be no oppression in matters of religion)¹⁰. So, Islam does not allow the forced conversion. Rather it says, لكم دينكم ولى دين (To you is your religion and for me is mine).¹¹

During colonial period in America Africa and Asia, the Christian missionaries worked under the umbrella of colonial power, but not followed by the Ottomans. Thomas Walker Arnold argues that the forced conversion under the Ottoman rule was never carried out.¹²

Rather the cause of spread of Islam was the moral superiority of the Ottomans as Arnold has given after referring an author of 17th-century who opines that forced conversion was never made by the Turks but through various means of treachery.¹³ Arnold rejecting his analysis of fraud has given that it was the personal ambition of the individuals sensitized by the high moral character of the Muhammadan Turks.¹⁴ Volunteer conversion to Islam was appreciated. A convert Muslim enjoyed the same living status that was for other Muslims; there was no discrimination between

converts and other Muslims. But, apostasy was punished by death.¹⁵ Nevertheless, conversion to Islam was encouraged through various means. As they themselves were the followers of Islam, so, the Ottomans provided more rights to the Muslims than the Christians and Jews as only Muslim subjects had the right to testify against the Muslims in court.¹⁶

But the subject under discussion is forced conversion which is untraceable in that society. It is not surprising as every ruling class gives more respect to the people of their own faith. The main concern is “No compulsion to conversion”.

Judicial Equality for Communities:

The best example of state behavior towards minorities can be observed in the judicial matters. If in litigation, they are considered at par with the main populace, then their rights are preserved. Courts are meant to provide justice to the community. If this system becomes polluted, the society becomes filled tyranny and oppression. Ottomans provided more relaxed attitude towards minorities as compared to the Muslim population. To facilitate the interaction between various religious groups and to balance the central and local authority, a complex system of local jurisprudence was organized. The theme behind this was differences of religious beliefs of various people under the Ottoman power.¹⁷

The court system was divided into three types:

1. For Muslims
2. For non-Muslims (dhimmīs), for their own communities
3. Trade Courts

Dhimmīs had freedom to operate their own courts in accordance to the legal systems of their communities till it had no involvement of other religious factions, major illegal acts, or menace harmony to public order. In specific and clearly defined matters as killing of a Muslim or to resolve trade disputes, Christians could be dealt through the non-Christian courts.

Though, the dhimmīs had separate courts but Crampton has mentioned that in 18th and 19th centuries, the instances to use Muslim courts by the dhimmīs are much common. The litigation against the Muslims, property, business matters, cases against other non-Muslims, even against one's own family were registered by the dhimmīs. They even brought the cases pertaining to marriage, divorce and inheritance to be decided under the Sharī'ah law. There are even records of oaths sworn by dhimmīs as by the Muslims.¹⁸

The Western sources allegedly say, a Muslim's testimony was considered more authentic than that of a Christian. A Christian had to face the problem of building trust in Muslim court. Even his oath over the Qur'an was considered perjury.¹⁹ All millets were allowed to establish their own institutions in which their own language was used as medium of instructions.

Devshirme:

The most controversial practice of the Ottomans is Devshirme. The literal meaning of Devshirme means “gathering”, known as the blood tax or levy in blood and it was a tradition of the Ottomans. In this practice the Balkan Christian children were forcefully taken by the government. The practice started in the reign of Murad-I and continued till 17th century. Through this legal commandment Christians had to provide young boys who would become the responsibility of state in terms of training, education and all other requirements. After getting educated, they either started their career in Janissary or administrative offices. The people of high caliber could earn high status. Most of such people would have converted to Islamic faith and then considered to be free Muslims by the state.²⁰

Jiziya collected from dhimmīs which was also paid to the previous regimes (lesser than the previous ones) and was considered to be material proof of Dhimmīs' subjection.²¹

The sources prove that through such process the ablest and most talented children were produced. The Sultan had the complete authority over these children called ghilman and they tried to prove their loyalty to the king. Talent was the only cause of prominence in the eyes of Ottomans.²² Besides various languages, they were trained in administration and war affairs. The genius persons could reach the high positions. Impressed by the Ottoman behavior, mostly such people became converted but under Murad II, Mehmed the Conqueror, and Salim I many non-Muslims occupied high ranks in administration. Muslims and non-Muslims held provincial administrative positions. Though it seems persecution but looking fairly one cannot find any traces of forced conversion and the adopted children were given free education and training. There are examples that such people after getting education performed important responsibilities despite of retaining their ancestral religious beliefs.

The Jewish Community:

The Jewish community needs special attention as at that time they were being victimized in other parts of the world especially in Spain. After the official decree by Bayazid II, the Jews settled in the European portion of the empire and called as Sephardic(meaning Spanish)Jews as most of them were expelled from Spain in 1492. They worked as doctors in the courts of the Ottoman sultans and in the Ottoman army. They were allowed to establish their own printing presses and famous rabbis published commentaries on the Jewish scriptures. Negating the Western view of biased behavior Edward Said has called it the distortion of historic facts, Western prejudice against Arab Islamic people and an abuse of “Orientalism”.²³ No biased behavior is reported at the hands of Ottomans.

Bruce Masters opines:

Westerners having prejudice against Muslims distorted realities and their

relationships with Christians and Jews under the Ottoman Empire.²⁴

They were considered Ahl al-kitāb. So, they enjoyed such a good status under the Ottomans which European minorities could not enjoy, where Jews and Muslims had to face persecution due to religious prejudice.

No doubt, the Osmanlis showed generous behavior towards the migratee Jews. According to a statement from a prominent historian, A. L. Sachar (1967), who, in his book 'History of the Jews', clearly elaborated on this unique atmosphere of religious tolerance by saying that they were well treated by the Ottomans at the time when in the West they were being persecuted and they had to pay the poll tax only.²⁵

A Jewish Italian, David dei Rossi, the visitor of Jerusalem in the 16th Century, has portrayed the nJewish life in these words:

"Here we are not in exile as in our own country ...There are no special Jewish taxes"²⁶

"...the Greeks who were under Venetian rule preferred the rule of the Turks, who allowed them communal autonomy and religious freedom, to that of the Venetians, who subjected them to centralized control and to the unceasing proselytism of Catholic priests"²⁷

Millet System to establish Peace and Harmony:

To avoid conflicts and confrontations in a multi religious society and to have a just dealing with dhimmīs, the Ottomans introduced the concept of 'Millet' in which the people of one religion were organized in a single community. Each Millet was fully authorized to deal with the affairs of its individuals. Benjamine Braude has given that they were clumped into one Millet. In this system Rabbi had to serve as a representative of the community. Government did not approach the individuals for the collection of Jiziyah, rather through the Rabbi. Both the Christian and Jewish communities were administered by their own representatives and state never interfered within the community.²⁸

In this way community enjoyed complete autonomy under its representatives. The representatives even had the power of legislation and enforcement. The complaints of the community were also pleaded by their representatives and their voice was given weightage before the Sublime Porte.²⁹

Roderic H. Davison says, Millets provided the grounds of certain modernization and reformation.³⁰

It is considered that through this system a reform to make the military duty mandatory for all instead of special Poll tax(Jiziyah) was implemented, but practically most of the dhimmīs preferred to pay tax instead of military service.³¹

Ottomans' Treatment with other Religious Communities

It is argued that though this system was already established but strengthened and extended to Armenian and Gregorian communities having a socio-cultural resemblance with the Ottoman Empire.

Sultans, the Guardian of the Whole Community:

The behavior of Ottomans was not like the foreign invaders. This spirit was inculcated in to the populace. The people always perceived them as guardians of their rights. Bernard Lewis discussing the issue has given that this spirit was derived from Islamic principles of humanism. The Ottomans did not have any arrogance against other communities. It was their immense patience and humanism which strengthened socio-cultural pluralism. In this way, they established unity and sharing of power with all ethnic and religious groups of the state. It is rightly said that "the Ottoman Empire was tolerant to other religions and its Christian and Jewish subjects lived, on the whole, in peace and security".³²

Inalcik has also emphasized that Ottoman spirit had its roots in the Islamic teachings and the liberty, tolerance and free mixing with the people of other religions was made possible by the force of Islamic principles present in the Ottoman mind set.³³

The best way to check the tolerant behavior is the time when a victorious enters the defeated land. The Ottomans behavior is exemplary in this connection.

Sultan Mohammad-II, after the conquest, issued a proclamation declaring that the pillage was at an end, and assuring to the Greeks toleration and protection if they quit their hiding places and return to their homes.³⁴

A 15th century Byzantine historian, George Sphrantzes, after witnessing the fall of Constantinople has given that the Sultan, not only treated good with the citizens but also constructed the demolished houses and ordered the people to be treated according to their status which was before the conquest.³⁵

In addition to this, Arnold, in his book "The Preaching of Islam" states that:

"When Constantinople was finally opened to the justice of Islam in 1453 Sultan Mohammad-II proclaimed himself the protector of the Greek church. Persecution of the Christians was forbidden and a decree issued securing for the newly elected patriarch, Gennadios, and his bishops and successors after him, all the privileges previously enjoyed under the former rule. Gennadios was given the pastoral staff by the Sultan himself. The Patriarch was also empowered to bring to the attention of the government and Sultan acts of unjust governors".³⁶

This treatment brought its fruit to develop love in the minds of the people. David William has rightly given:

"By his liberal policy and broad mindedness, Mohammad, the Conqueror made the control of the Christian population tenfold easier".³⁷

It was very different from the treatment of other regimes at that time. A well known historian, Eversely, justifies this argument that:

“This great act of tolerance of Mahomet was far ahead of the political ethics of the Christian Powers of Europe at that time. His example was not followed by the Spaniards, when they drove from their country the Muslim Moors, who had refused to adopt the religion of their victors. The action of Mahomet is another proof that the Turkish invasion of Europe was not actuated by religious fanaticism or the desire to spread Islam. There seems to have been no attempt to induce or compel the Greeks and others of the conquered city to embrace Islam”.³⁸

Religious Freedom by the Ottomans:

Religious freedom was a unique feature of the Ottomans. The best manifestation of attitude may be at the time of conquest. Ottomans were successful in this regard. After the conquest of Constantinople, responding to such a question Mehmed II said that he would construct a church by the side of all mosques where Christian people will be able to pray”.³⁹

At the peak of Ottoman Rule, the historic event of Christian cruelty and bigotry occurred. After conquering Spain, they demanded the defeated people, either to be Christians or to leave the land, otherwise persecution would be the fate. At that moment of turmoil, the Ottomans not only welcomed the Jews, allowed them to trade but also not showed even a single sign of hatred against the Christians living under their rule. Stanford Shaw has given that even the Christian peasants of the Balkan states were allowed to remain on their lands.⁴⁰

Mazower discussing the issue has portrayed that co-existence in that regime was indiscriminate behavior of the rulers to all communities.⁴¹ Religion being a more salient category, all Muslims and non-Muslims were separate entities.

Freedom of Language to all Communities:

Language is the identity of a nation. It saves the culture, religious and social norms of its people. It is a mean of communication among the people. It provides territorial, communal and sometimes religious identity. The conquerors try to change this mean to absorb the people in their regime in their effort of diminishment of their culture, no historic evidence on the part of Osmanlis to restrict the use of language is there. Though Turkish was the official language but all other languages were allowed, even in Constantinople about fifteen languages were spoken. Not even a single community was compelled to leave its language. Every language, culture and literature was tolerated and allowed.⁴²

Unbiased attitude of Osmanlis:

While living in a multifarious society relations may also be diverse, Sale, Purchase and borrowing is there in daily life. In such circumstances the relations may be of friendship or enmity. Multiculturalism can be developed only through impartiality. Osmanlis had no prejudice in any facet of relations. In Ottoman community, people

had no religious discrimination, rather factual justice and injustice was kept in view. Qāḍī records present an example that may be quoted here:

A dhimmī named Constantine of Buyuk Susgirli village registered a complaint of rape attempt with his wife against a Muslim named Hassan Piri. Among the witnesses of the occasion, three Muslims and three non-Muslims appeared before the court and Hassan Piri was punished. Even Hassan Piri's own brother witnessed against him.⁴³

It portrays that in society, there was no discrimination on religious bases and not in the courts. It also shows the confidence of non-Muslim people on the Muslim courts. The Muslims even used to participate in the religious gatherings of other religions. Cetin has quoted the instance dated 2 June, 1575, Huma bint Ali of Bursa Esrefliler quarter went to participate the celebration held by Jews. This was held in the memory of Mūsā's(A.S) return from the Tūr Mountain. . . it shows participation of Muslim lady in even the religious festivities of Jews. This was the state of relationships between various religious groups at that time. Non-Muslims also participated in the Islamic activities of Muslims.⁴⁴

Braude and Lewis have argued that tolerance in the Ottoman context was generally speaking, discrimination without persecution.⁴⁵

H.A.R. Gibb has underscored that under the Ottomans Islamic law was not forcefully implemented upon non-Muslim minorities. They had the independence of preference and had their own religious organizations. It was a greatest strength and later on proved weakness of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁶

In a state, the talented individuals may grasp position because of their Capabilities. In a multicultural society where the ruling regime has to deal with diverse religions, there should be the well-defined criteria for opportunities to be availed. There were three spheres of government employment: religion and jurisprudence, military and public affairs, and the civil service. The first sphere was only for Muslim-born subjects. The ulema after years of theological, pedagogic and legal studies were appointed as judges and professors. Except this sphere, the other two branches could be joined up mainly by non-Muslims, none of them was lower than the Muslims. In the Ottoman system religious or racial discrimination can't be determined. After reformation in 19th century, thinkers and priests argued that implementation of integrated law would divest them of their liberties. The historic records prove that non-Muslims could resolve their family matters within their own community and patriarchs and metropolitans were granted authority to discipline the priests who were subordinate to them.⁴⁷

The government was the property of rulers and religion being considered as the people's property defended against the most likely case of revolt and destruction of the Centuries-long peace between religions, a peculiar feature of the Ottoman system and it was not the internal failure but the result of European intervention and European style nationalism that created chaos in the Ottoman society.

Among the excellent traits of the Ottomans T. W. Arnold has included their prayer offering, singing of Psalms of David, giving alms and involvement in other good works, their high opinion about Jesus the Christ and their decent behavior to the Bible. On account of these good tendencies, they were deemed virtuous and the people preferred to be like them.⁴⁸

Marmaduke Pickthal has quoted from his memory that he saw a person who had stolen from the treasure of Sepulchro of the monastery of St. George and tried fleeing from there to Europe. He was caught at Jaffa by Turkish Custom officers and brought to the city of Jerusalem. Owing to the protection given to Dhimmīs by the Turkish law, he implored the officer to be dealt with the Ottoman law. But the officer replied that they could not interfere the affairs of minorities.⁴⁹

Marmaduke has also given another example of Ottomans' tolerance towards other religions that based upon a firman of three hundred years back that was principally for Franciscan Friars missionaries to work in the Ottoman empire. However, in writing, the name of the mission was not specified, so all missions were allowed to carry out their missionary activities in the state.⁵⁰

Mazower has explicated that ethnic, religious and cultural differences never caused problem in mutual co-existence in daily life as all religious beliefs were respected, even each other's amulets were used.⁵¹

Conclusion:

The supra quoted literature elucidates the ottomans' tolerant behavior towards other religions. As a ruler, they provided freedom to the church, organized various religious communities in to millets, giving them autonomy in everyday matters of life. Forced conversion is out of question in the Ottoman society. Though conversion to Islam was welcomed and apostasy from Islam was punishable offence, but they never forced others to be convert Muslims. The rite of Devshirme can't be justified in terms of Islamic teachings, even then the adopted personnel were never forced for conversion. Many persons enjoyed the higher ranks despite of being non-Muslims and they emerged from the same Devshirme. Actually, it is perhaps purely a political decision as the minorities would have not contributed to the state affairs, otherwise. Separate court system was introduced to guarantee justice to minorities. The higher moral character of the Ottomans fascinated the minorities to such an extent that they preferred to be the Muslims and also preferred that their issues be decided according to the Islamic law that provides more relaxation for minorities. At that time, west was polluted with the biased behavior towards other communities. When the Jews were expelled from Spain, they were welcomed by the Ottomans, not only given protection but also given freedom of business and trade. All the religious communities were given freedom of language so that their ritual treasure may remain preserved. Fascinated by the official policies, such a wave of mutual co-existence prevailed that various religious communities participated each others' religious festivals. Ottomans' tolerant behavior is appreciated, not only by the orient literature but western scholarship also applauds their tolerant behaviour.

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