



Tolerance, Minorities, and Ideological Perspectives

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Abstract

Muslims and Muslim rulers are often accused of being intolerant of, and oppressive to, religious minorities. Using the Ottoman *millet* system as a case study, the first part of this paper demonstrates that, historically, religious tolerance was a hallmark of Muslim societies. This tolerance was embodied in a group-rights model that preferred the rights of the community as a whole over the individual, a stark contrast from the individual liberty that is common in contemporary Western societies. The group-rights model, albeit unfamiliar to most of us today, was arguably a more effective system of pluralism. The second part of the paper discusses the external factors that indicate that preferring the community over the individual is not a guarantor of true tolerance. By engaging these concerns, one can recognize how negative perceptions of Muslim treatment of religious minorities have been shaped largely through Western ideologies.

Introduction

In 1609, King Philip III of the Spanish Kingdom publicly declared in regard to all the remaining Muslims who were secretly practicing their religion:¹ "All the Moriscos of this kingdom, men and women, with their children, within three days of the publication of this decree in the places where they live and have their houses, must leave...[If they do not] then any person can, without incurring any penalty, arrest them and seize their goods, turning them over to the officials in the nearest place, and if they resist, they may kill them."²

This decree was immediately spread throughout the kingdom to ensure the final and complete expulsion of the Moriscos (Moors), the Spanish Muslims who were forced to convert to Christianity during the Spanish Reconquista of 1492 under King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella. Over a century later, the Spanish Kingdom

¹ *Early Modern Spain: A Documentary History*, ed. Jon Cowans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 145.

² *Ibid.*, 146.

was facing severe losses against Dutch rebels. Out of fear that many of the Christian "converts" were still practicing Islam in private and might also rebel against the Spanish authority, King Philip III diverted his people's attention away from the political and economic crises by directing distrust toward this internal enemy, and caused the forced emigration of close to over three hundred thousand Moriscos.³

This large-scale persecution was not unique to Spain. In 12th century France, the Catholic Church initiated inquisitions to protect itself and its kingdoms from growing heretical sects and other religious minorities. What became a systematic form of oppressing individuals who dissented from the core ideologies of the Catholic Church eventually reached Spain several centuries later. It was during the Spanish Inquisition that both Jews and Muslims, who had managed to remain in the region after forced mass conversion or expulsion, became objects of severe regulation. This intense suppression even led prominent Christian leaders to speak out against the intolerance, despite the zealous and popular support for expulsion by the majority of the population.⁴ The Archbishop of Seville in 1610, for example, called on the king to be compassionate toward the innocent and revise his decree. The archbishop's calls, however, were futile, and the Jews and Muslims who had lived for seven centuries in Spain were left with no alternative but to leave their homeland.

Oddly enough, these profound historical events are rarely recognized, let alone discussed, perhaps because they highlight Christian intolerance of other religions. They are also not unique; Jews and Christian minority sects have often been persecuted at the hands of dominant Christian rulers. The point in mentioning the Spanish Reconquista is not to use the incident as a blanket indictment of Christian intolerance; rather, it is an opportunity to reflect on the fact that it is Muslims and Muslim rulers that are more often than not the archetypal object of academic and popular discussions of intolerant and oppressive regimes, while a blind eye is

³ Ibid., 145.

⁴ Ibid., 149.

turned to documented oppressions by other dominant religious kingdoms.⁵ This rewriting of history is not unintentional. In this paper, I address two key questions: 1) Was the Islamic system that regulated religious minorities indeed oppressive in its historical context; and 2) If not, what ideological framework(s) have led to the belief that Islamic regimes are particularly intolerant of minorities? By engaging these queries, we can develop a deeper understanding of how negative perceptions of Muslim treatment of religious minorities have been shaped largely through Western ideologies.

Case Study: The Ottoman *Millet* System

In the previous essay on [Religious Minorities under Muslim Rule](#), we discussed the foundations of minority treatment in Muslim lands. Once lands were conquered by Muslims, non-Muslims in the region were either contracted with mutual terms through a *ṣulḥ* agreement, or granted the opportunity of becoming *dhimmīs*, protected religious minorities. Becoming a *dhimmī* guaranteed one safety, exemption from military service, and the freedom to continue practicing one's religion in return for the *jizyah*, or poll-tax, and loyalty to the state. Later, under Ottoman rule, an official *millet* system was established. The term *millet* was used to refer to communities of religious minorities, and eventually led to the standardized arrangement of a formal relationship between minority groups and the state.⁶ In other words, the Ottoman Empire developed a system in which *millets* had specific rights and responsibilities to state authorities in order to help define and ensure their legal autonomy. This system, which was refined over the course of Ottoman rule and eventually overturned in favor of a citizenship paradigm, is a prime example of a method that, while successful during its time (as will be demonstrated), ultimately succumbed to European imperialist pressures and demands to conform to modern forms of secularism and liberalism.

⁵ This is not to imply that non-religious rule is free of fault. Because the focus is on medieval or classical histories, secularist rule is not considered in the current discussion.

⁶ Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, "Introduction" in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, vol. I (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 12-13.

The *millet* system initially developed as a means by which the Ottoman administration could properly organize the various religious and ethnic groups under its rule.⁷ Incorporating these groups into the larger Ottoman economic and political system allowed for the preservation of the various cultural and religious identities these communities claimed.⁸ Thus, although the *millet* system required administrative and social reforms for each minority group, it overlooked ethnic and religious differences in order to maintain the Empire's unity and productivity.⁹ It was no secret that Muslims still held the highest status under Ottoman rule, but in contrast to former Christian empires, the Ottomans never attempted to erase religious or ethnic identities through mass forced conversions, for example, in favor of sameness.¹⁰

One of the most widely acknowledged aspects of the *millet* system was the appointment of official heads or patriarchs for each religious community.¹¹ Every patriarch was appointed by his own community in order to ensure his authority vis-a-vis their respect and obedience; if he ever overstepped his boundaries, only they had the right to replace him. The head also had the dual responsibility of reporting to his Ottoman supervisor, usually the chief *qāḍī* or judge, and to his congregation. Members of his community, in turn, were required to bring all of their complaints to him in order to create an efficient process of filing and resolving claims. If there were members who could not afford to pay the *jizyah*, for instance, the patriarch would be responsible for granting financial aid and submitting the tax collectively on behalf of his entire community.¹²

⁷ Kemal Karpat, "Millets and Nationality: The Roots of the Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era" in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, vol. I (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 141.

⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 35.

¹¹ Amnon Cohen, "On the Realities of the *Millet* System: Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century" in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, vol. II (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 12.

¹² Ibid., 13.

A Model for Tolerance

Despite the rights the *millet* system ensured, modern theorists have deemed this model deficient. In the late 20th century, political and moral philosopher John Rawls described the concept of religious tolerance in light of the liberal tradition as the individual choice to practice one's religion freely or to change it as one saw fit.

¹³ This freedom of conscience, or individual liberty, is considered to be the height of both tolerance and human rights. Will Kymlicka, another political philosopher, however challenged this view that has been taken for granted in most Western democracies. Unlike the Rawlsian model which places the individual at the core of the argument, Kymlicka proposed a group-rights model, in which groups rather than individuals serve as self-governing units that are granted collective rights and responsibilities. His argument essentially boils down to the fact that group-rights models, like the *millet* system, were effective methods of granting religious liberties to communities as a whole, even though they may have restricted individuals' opportunities to change or dissent from their original religion.

In the Ottoman embodiment of the group-rights model, the *millets*—primarily the Greek and Armenian Orthodox communities and the Jews—enjoyed self-government and legal autonomy.¹⁴ That said, in relation to the dominant religion of Islam, *millets* were limited in their public expressions of religion. Hence, under some circumstances, minorities were required to dress distinctly from the Muslims and could not proselytize. Nevertheless, the *millet* model allowed for religious coexistence and did not persecute those who obeyed their respective patriarchs as well as the laws of the land. This model is thus quite in contrast to liberal expectations espoused by Rawls, Locke, and others through its deep commitment to conservative and theocratic values, thereby uniting "church and state."¹⁵ Through this system, the Ottoman Empire ruled vast territories, diverse in ethnicity and religion, for almost half a millennium, while avoiding religious wars

¹³ Will Kymlicka, "Two Models of Pluralism and Tolerance," in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

and large-scale persecution, allowing Kymlicka to reason that the *millet* model "is arguably the more natural form of religious tolerance."¹⁶

The Rawlsian model, on the other hand, goes so far as to contend that individual liberty is the *only* way of ensuring tolerant and pluralistic societies, assuming that former methods (i.e., group-rights) could never guarantee this vision. Yet, as Kymlicka notes, religious toleration was indeed in effect prior to England's Toleration Act or any universal declaration.¹⁷ While the *millet* system did not address Rawls' individual liberty question, it was a model far ahead of any paradigm Europe had even considered. In fact, it was not until the signing of the Peace of Westphalia treaties in 1648 that Europe was able to end a century's-long religious battle over whether it was possible for subjects to hold a religious belief distinct from the ruler's faith.¹⁸ Hence, as Kymlicka points out, there were methods designed to establish tolerant and pluralistic societies prior to those of liberal democracies.¹⁹

That said, with any group-rights model comes a concern for limited individual freedom in regard to one's religious commitments.²⁰ In other words, challenging one's religious affiliation was virtually unheard of in the *millet* model; one was expected to follow the tradition one inherited and to fulfill the responsibilities set by the patriarch. Hence, proselytization and apostasy were, under certain conditions, criminal offenses.²¹ Adherents to liberal ideology, for this reason, may argue that this model curtails individual autonomy and consequently denies one the opportunity to think critically of their religion in their pursuit of the truth. This is presumably harmful for society since it removes rational thinking and choice, preventing individuals from pursuing their own interests for the sake of the larger society.²²

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸ Mahmood, 33.

¹⁹ Kymlicka, 87.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ This was true in the Muslim community as well.

²² Ibid., 88.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it assumes that every individual can properly assess what is good and is constantly seeking the benefit of their society.²³ The group-rights model, on the other hand, presumes that the most powerful identity one holds is their religious affiliation. Since it was the absolute crux of holding society together, members of the community were expected to do everything they could to ensure the protection of that identity even if it overrode their own personal interests. Hence, there was no concern about the prohibition of proselytizing and apostasy since these were acts that would not merely harm the individual him or herself, but their community as a whole.

So what does this all mean for us? Well, for one, it allows us to recognize that the *millet* system created a template that recognized collective liberties and formed tolerant societies, despite our assumption today that tolerance is impossible without individual autonomy.²⁴ From a bigger picture standpoint, however, creating tolerance *between* groups was seen as more important than promoting individual liberties *within* a group. Thus group-rights models form a social plurality that ensures the protection of each community at large. Recognizing this alternative form of creating a tolerant society does not, of course, require us to insist that it is the *only* form. In fact, we can acknowledge the success of this system while still advocating for the liberal model of individual autonomy, as Kymlicka himself has done. The point is to be careful and not simply denounce historical Islamic communal and religious organization as intolerant or oppressive. The *millet* standard was not only successful in preventing religious wars, but it also granted collective liberties (e.g., their own courts, the right to practice their religion without interference, etc.) to each religious minority community.

From Group-Rights to Liberalism: The *Tanzimat* Reforms

As early as the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire began to face direct threats to their power by multiple military losses to European forces in addition to countless

²³ Ibid., 89.

²⁴ Ibid., 93.

internal political conflicts.²⁵ Efforts under various sultans were carried out in order to reform the Ottoman administrative and military systems to protect the empire from defeat, with the assumption that their consistent failures were merely a result of not fully embodying the traditional Ottoman system. And so the Ottoman military remained stagnant in implementing reforms that could have combatted some of the newer and more effective methods of the European armed forces. Moreover, later, during the 18th century, Ottomans faced several devastating defeats at the hands of Russia.

To make matters worse, notions of nationalism emerged and spread like wildfire throughout the Empire. Now the ruling body faced a number of nationalist uprisings by ethnic groups who sought to separate themselves from the Turks. Along with these separatist movements came the loss of land and mass murder amidst the fight for new identities and nation-states. Finally, as a result of increased globalization and trade, European presence and influence dramatically rose throughout Ottoman lands, causing both increased financial dependence on external powers as well as foreign influences on Ottoman practices. Some European states, for example, sought out Christian grievances, only to politically and economically interfere by allowing them to evade Ottoman laws and their duties as citizens.²⁶ As European power increased, certain non-Muslim individuals sought protection from nations like Russia and France, thereby transforming their relationship with the Ottoman Empire to one of resident alien.²⁷ Simultaneously taking advantage of their own government and that of foreign powers merely added to the political tensions that were soon to boil over.

In light of these challenges, Ottoman leaders initiated a series of reforms that focused on both "centralization" of the military and administration, as well as "Westernization" of the existing models. These reforms culminated in what is known as the *Tanzimat* (lit. "organizing") period during the mid-nineteenth century. One of the biggest amendments relevant to our discussion, was the

²⁵ Stanford J. Shaw and Gökhan Çetinsaya, "Ottoman Empire" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*.

²⁶ Mahmood, 40.

²⁷ Braude and Lewis, 32-3.

abolition of the *millet* system in favor of modern conceptions of citizenship. In 1839, the Imperial Edict of Gülhane acknowledged equal rights for both Muslims and non-Muslims before the law. Later in 1856, another imperial edict called for socio-economic reform by uniting the various educational systems formerly separated by religion. Finally, political rights were granted to all citizens in 1876, transforming the Empire into a "constitutional monarchy."²⁸

The *Tanzimat* Period was a significant chapter in history: this was the moment the Ottoman Empire appeared to officially recognize the superiority of the West and its Enlightenment ideas. Only by adopting the great values espoused in the liberal and secular systems could this long-standing empire continue to progress as a nation. Or so it was assumed. Not surprisingly, the cookie-cutter European paradigm for the world did not fit so neatly on an empire founded on disparate values. The Ottoman state adopted reforms of citizenship not because they suddenly woke up one day and believed that their centuries-long effective *millet* system was now deeply flawed, thanks to Western ideals shedding light on the situation. In fact, the Europeans themselves, like the Ottomans who followed suit, were not actually concerned with establishing tolerance; rather, they were determined to institute state sovereignty and to direct their subjects' loyalty to the nation-state.²⁹ Ottomans, moreover, were troubled by the increasing loss of territory through provincial rebellions, which demanded the empire unify its fragmented polity.³⁰

Along with a unified polity came the aim of fostering brotherhood among all Ottomans, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.³¹ Yet, as a result of this foreign strategy that demanded a melting pot over a pluralistic society, many of the Ottoman territories found it difficult to adjust to entirely different social, political, and economic standards overnight. In Syria in particular, where Muslim and Christian communities had co-existed for generations, tensions dramatically increased, and

²⁸ Shaw and Çetinsaya, "Ottoman Empire."

²⁹ Mahmood, 25.

³⁰ Mahmood, 39.

³¹ Moshe Ma'oz, "Communal Conflicts in Ottoman Syria during the Reform Era: The Role of Political and Economic Factors" in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, vol. II (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 91.

relations between Muslims and Christians as well as between Christians and Jews became severely polarized. Cevdet Paşa, an Ottoman statesman, described the reactions of the religious communities as follows:³²

...As for the non-Muslims, this day, when they left the status of raya [i.e. minorities] and gained equality with the ruling millet, was a day of rejoicing. But the patriarchs and other spiritual chiefs were displeased, because their appointments were incorporated in the ferman [royal decree].

What was ultimately at stake throughout this transitional process was the unrecognized growing tension between establishing a legal and secular notion of statehood versus maintaining a national identity based on religion.³³ Hence, as the nation-state developed, two systems—the political and religious—that were formerly (for the most part) independent, now had to consolidate and act as expressions of one another.

Liberalism's Vanity

So if the group-rights model was a plausible and arguably more natural form of tolerance, why has Islamic history been tainted with accusations of brutality toward religious minorities?³⁴ This question opens the door to a much larger concern: what lens are we using to evaluate Muslims' treatment of religious minorities in the first place?

Western democracies are defined by secular and liberal models. Political theorist Wendy Brown has extensively discussed the pitfalls of examining the concept of tolerance through these paradigms. The premise of liberal secularism, for example, is undergirded by a privatization and individualization of religion; any culture or society that promotes a public space for religion is therefore by definition

³² As cited in Braude and Lewis, 30.

³³ Karpat, 144.

³⁴ Look no further than Robert Spencer's *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005).

considered intolerant.³⁵ Liberalism, in other words, is the antonym of culture, because it is culture that calls for public religious expression and strips individuals of their liberties. Hence, liberalism masquerades as the culture-less doctrine that focuses on persons and ensures individual freedom.³⁶

This is a myth, Brown claims, because liberalism, like every culture and ideology it criticizes, succumbs to both cultural and political influence.³⁷ Yet, at the end of the day, since liberalism places itself above other doctrines and practices, it considers all other doctrines as intolerant or uncivilized.³⁸ Accordingly, what complies with liberal standards is "mainstream" or "American" even though these concepts are steeped in Protestant dogmas. It is this form of tolerance, then, that has been upheld as the token of Western civilization and modernity, thereby granting the West both validity and authority in acting as agents in international affairs.³⁹ As indirect recipients of this ideological disciplining, we have been led to believe that this form of tolerance is the only one that is legitimate; hence, we naturally consider all else, like the group-rights model, illegitimate.

Saba Mahmood elaborates on these theories by calling out two contradictory aspects of the nation-state, which claims to be free of cultural and religious associations. For one, the modern state is heavily involved in religious regulation.⁴⁰ Despite its claims to be irreligious, its inherent faith doctrines (read often in the West as Protestant norms) dictate which aspects of religion can and cannot be tolerated in the public sphere (e.g., polygamy versus same-sex marriage).⁴¹ Naturally, as a result of this subjective management, a second paradox arises:

³⁵ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 21.

³⁶ Ibid., 21-2.

³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁰ Mahmood, 2.

⁴¹ Ibid., 2, 4. "Conventionally, tolerance is adduced for beliefs or practices that may be morally, socially, or ideologically offensive but are not in direct conflict with the law...Laws of course may be changed in the name of greater tolerance, as in the repeal of antiscegenation or antisodomy laws, or in the name of less tolerance, as in laws banning same-sex marriage or restricting abortion. But in each case, the negotiation is between what is deemed a private or individual choice appropriately beyond the reach of law (hence tolerable) and what is deemed a matter of the public interest (hence not a matter of tolerance)" Mahmood, 12.

religious differences are intensified. These inconsistencies attest to liberalism's underlying goal of promoting sameness, or treating every individual equally under the law, while the ideology does not even hold itself to that standard.⁴² Tolerance, on the other hand, accepts and values difference; it does not attempt to insist that all religions are the same and therefore we should treat each other under the same metric that may not apply to everyone. Rather, it affirms these differences in theology and culture, and instead of labelling said differences as morally offensive or uncivilized, tolerance promotes and acknowledges a diverse system.⁴³

Conclusion

In my A.P. History class in high school, we made t-shirts to remember the year with “P.O.V.” printed in large letters on the back. These initials stood for “point of view.” If there was one thing we had taken away from that year-long intensive, it was that our conceptualization of history was entirely determined by our points of view. We were always taught to approach a text by asking: Who authored this book? In what time period were they writing? What social or political circumstances may have introduced biases into their description of history? It’s these same questions that I continue to ask myself when I approach critical moments that have shaped the past and present. Hence, when we consider concerns over “Islamic” approaches to tolerance and the minority question, we need to recognize the political and social ideologies that have contributed to our thought processes. We need to challenge the notion that liberty and tolerance can universally be defined as only one form throughout time and space. Just as importantly, we need to recognize the double standards our societies adopt: we cannot point an accusing finger to the past while turning a blind eye to the inequities faced by America’s non-citizens today.

Islamic history is not free of fault; yet before engaging in discussions on the supposed intolerance of Islam, let us not forget the fact that it took the “enlightened” West almost a millennium before beginning to even consider the tolerance Muslim Empires had instituted centuries before.

⁴² Brown, 36.

⁴³ Brown, 12, 36; Mahmood, 36.