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Amer Daffar,

Assistant professor at Lusail University, adaffar@lu.edu.qa, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2293-2346>

Sumaia Al-Yazidi

Lecturer at Lusail University, salyazidi@lu.edu.qa, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6861-4322>

Religious Institutions and Rituals in the Ottoman State

Osmanlı Devleti'nde Dinî Kurumlar ve Ritüeller

Abstract: This study explores the relationship between Ottoman political and religious institutions and rituals, addressing the longstanding debate over whether religion in the Ottoman state was politicized or institutionally autonomous. The research is driven by conflicting interpretations found in both Orientalist and modern historiography, many of which portray Ottoman governance as either theocratic or manipulative of Islam. By reexamining these claims, the study seeks to clarify the nature of Ottoman governance and the role played by religious institutions within it. This study adopts a legal-institutional analytical framework, examining the relationship between political authority and religious institutions through the functioning of key offices (such as the Shaykh al-Islām), judicial practices, and administrative structures. It adopts a descriptive-historical and analytical-critical approach grounded in comparative historiography. Primary and secondary sources are evaluated according to their relevance to legal institutions, administrative practice, and the degree of religious authority exercised independently from the sultanate. It combines historical analysis of primary sources such as chronicles, legal texts, and imperial practices with critical engagement with historiography, evaluating competing interpretations based on the degree of institutional independence, legal authority, and political intervention. Within this study, institutional autonomy is understood as the capacity to issue binding legal opinions, regulate judicial matters, and preserve procedural authority within the imperial structure. Arabic and Ottoman terms are transliterated according to standard academic conventions (Chicago/IJMES), with minor simplifications for readability. The research finds that Ottoman governance was neither theocratic nor based on divine right. Religious institutions, headed by the Shaykh al-Islām, enjoyed relative institutional autonomy, though within the broader framework of imperial sovereignty. The study also examines the Ottoman administration of Islamic rituals and religious practice within an institutional framework. The study offers a balanced reassessment of Ottoman religious governance and contributes to ongoing debates on religion and state in Islamic history, providing a framework for future comparative studies..

Keywords: Institutional governance, Islamic law, legal pluralism, Millet System, Sharī'a, Shaykh al-Islām.

Öz: Bu çalışma, Osmanlı siyasi otoritesi ile dini kurumlar ve ritüeller arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemekte ve Osmanlı Devleti'nde dinin siyasallaştırılıp siyasallaştırılmadığı ya da kurumsal olarak özerk olup olmadığını konusundaki uzun süredir devam eden tartışmayı ele almaktadır. Araştırma, hem Oryantalist hem de modern tarih yazımında yer alan ve Osmanlı yönetimini çoğu zaman teokratik ya da İslam'ı siyasi amaçlarla kullanan bir sistem olarak tasvir eden çelişkili yorumlardan hareketle ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu iddiaları yeniden değerlendirmeyi amaçlayan çalışma, Osmanlı yönetim yapısının niteliğini ve dini kurumların bu yapı içindeki rolünü daha açık biçimde ortaya koymayı hedeflemektedir. Bu çalışma metodolojik olarak betimleyici-tarihsel ve analitik-eleştirel bir yaklaşım benimsemektedir. Araştırmada Osmanlı kronikleri, hukuk metinleri ve idari kayıtlar gibi birincil kaynakların yanı sıra modern ikincil literatür de incelenmiştir. Analiz, farklı tarih yazımı yaklaşımlarının karşılaştırmalı bir okumasına dayanmakta; özellikle kurumsal yapılar, hukuki otorite ve idari uygulamalar üzerinde yoğunlaşmaktadır. Çalışma, dini otoritenin Osmanlı siyasi yapısı içinde nasıl işlediğini değerlendirmek amacıyla farklı akademik yorumları karşılaştırmaktadır. Araştırma, Osmanlı yönetiminin ne teokratik bir yapıya sahip olduğunu ne de ilahi hak (divine right) anlayışına dayandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Şeyhülislamın başında bulunduğu dini kurumlar kurumsal bir özerkliğe sahipti ve İslam hukuku siyasi bir araçtan ziyade yönlendirici bir çerçeve işlevi görüyordu. Çalışma ayrıca Osmanlı yönetiminin İslami ritüelleri ve dini uygulamaları kurumsal bir yapı içerisinde nasıl düzenlediğini de incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, Osmanlı'daki dini yönetim anlayışını dengeli bir biçimde yeniden değerlendirerek İslam tarihinde din ve devlet ilişkisine dair süregelen tartışmalara katkıda bulunmakta ve gelecekte yapılacak karşılaştırmalı çalışmalar için bir çerçeve sunmaktadır..

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu; Dini Kurumlar; İslami Ritüeller; Şeyhülislam; Millet Sistemi.

Introduction

Modern historiography presents different views on the nature of the Ottoman system of government and its relationship with Islamic religious institutions. In light of this debate, this study seeks to address the central question: What was the nature of the relationship between the Ottoman sultans and religious institutions and rituals within the state? From this question emerge several subsidiary inquiries: What was the nature of the Ottoman political system? How did Ottoman sultans and princes demonstrate concern for religious rituals? How did the Ottomans govern religiously diverse communities, particularly *ahl al-dhimma* (protected non-Muslims)? This article argues that the Ottoman state was neither a theocracy nor a system in which religion functioned merely as a political instrument. Rather, Ottoman governance was structured around legally institutionalized religious bodies that retained relative autonomy while operating within the wider imperial order.

This study contributes to Ottoman historiography by distinguishing between religious authority, as an institutional and legal framework, and religion, as a source of political legitimacy. Rather than relying on generalized claims about the politicization of Islam, it demonstrates that Ottoman governance operated through structured religious institutions that exercised relative institutional autonomy within the broader political system. By combining institutional analysis with historiographical comparison, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of religion–state relations in the Ottoman context. This approach aligns with recent trends in Ottoman studies that emphasize legal institutions and administrative practice over pure ideological interpretations of religion.¹ Accordingly, this article reassesses Ottoman religion-state relations through a legal-institutional framework instead of moving beyond inherited European church-state models and reductionist narratives that portray religion as merely a tool of political manipulation.

Previous Studies

Scholarship on Ottoman religion–state relations has developed around two major historiographical trends; the revisionist scholarship and the orientalist and statist interpretations. The orientalist and statist interpretations associated with scholars such as Halil İnalcık, Thomas W. Arnold and Bernard Lewis², who portrayed Islam primarily as an instrument of political domination. Halil İnalcık, in *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600*, and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, particularly in *The History and Civilization of the Ottoman Empire*, argue that official Ottoman Islam was closely linked to state interests and political power. Similar interpretations appear in the works of Thomas W. Arnold and Bernard Lewis, who depict Ottoman religious authority as subordinate to political authority. However, this perspective has been increasingly challenged by scholars who highlight institutional complexity rather than politicization³

In contrast, revisionist scholarship has challenged this reductionist model by emphasizing legal structures, institutional negotiation, and the relative autonomy of religious authority within the Ottoman system. Colin Imber’s study of Ebussuud Efendi demonstrates that Ottoman legal authority operated within a well-established Islamic legal tradition, where Shaykh al-Islām*

¹ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Bernard Lewis, *Istanbul and the Civilization of the Islamic Caliphate*, trans. into Arabic Arnold, T.W. (1965). *The Caliphate* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315443249>

³ Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973); Thomas W. Arnold, *The Caliphate** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924);

Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988);

Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, “Religion,” in *The Ottoman Empire: History and Civilization*, vol. 2, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2011)

exercised significant interpretive authority independent of direct political control. This evidence indicates that legal authority was not merely symbolic, but actively shaped governance through institutionalized jurisprudence. Likewise, Madeline Zilfi emphasizes the negotiated relationship between piety, law, and power, while Guy Burak and Leslie Peirce demonstrate that Ottoman legal practice was embedded in structured judicial institutions. These scholars collectively argue that Ottoman religious institutions had functional authority that shaped governance within a regulated legal framework rather than as a simple instrument of political domination⁴

Legal historians such as Uriel Heyd reinforce this interpretation by highlighting that judicial practice adhered to clear legal norms rather than arbitrary political orders (Studies in Old Ottoman Criminal Law). From a comparative imperial perspective, Karen Barkey's analysis of Ottoman governance situates religious institutions within a flexible imperial framework. He argues that the Ottoman system managed religious diversity through independent institutions, particularly the *millet* system that gave religious communities some legal and administrative autonomy (Empire of Difference). Suraiya Faroqhi similarly situates religious institutions within broader social and administrative frameworks. She emphasizes that religious institutions are viewed as integral components of Ottoman society rather than tool for political domination. Arab and Muslim historians including Mohammad Jamil Bayhum and Mohammad Farid Bek further contribute to this debate by stressing the recognition of scholarly independence and judicial authority within the Ottoman system. Ignatius Dohsson, likewise, emphasizes on the role of religious scholars in legitimizing state authority while maintaining institutional independence⁵

Positioned within this historiographical debate, this study situates itself within institutional and legal approach to Ottoman religion-state relation. It contributes to existing literature by examining Ottoman religious institutions as organized, authoritative bodies operating within an Islamic legal framework rather than as instruments of political control. At the same time, it advances the debate by arguing that these institutions functioned within an institutional legal framework that granted conditional autonomy while integrating them into imperial governance. Through exploring and analyzing these perspectives, this study contributes to the ongoing debates concerning the balance between integration and independence in Ottoman religion-state relation.

1. The Nature of the Ottoman System of Government

1.1. The Ottomans and Islam

Ahmet Yaşar Ocak describes Ottoman Islam as a “politicized Islam”, h stated:

⁴ Colin Imber, *Ebu 's-su 'ud: The Islamic Legal Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); Madeline C. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age (1600–1800)* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988);

Guy Burak, *The Second Formation of Islamic Law: The Hanafi School in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015);

Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

(*) The highest religious office in the Ottoman state, responsible for appointing and dismissing judges, supervising teaching and schools, and issuing legal religious opinions (*fatwas*). This title came into use at the end of the seventeenth century, replacing the earlier designation of *mufti*. From the mid-nineteenth century until the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Shaykh al-Islām was nominated to the Council of Ministers. See: Su'ād Şabān, *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Ottoman Historical Terms*, reviewed by 'Abd al-Razzāq Muḥammad Ḥasan Barakāt (Riyadh: King Fahd National Library Publications, 2000), 142.

⁵ Uriel Heyd, *Studies in Old Ottoman Criminal Law*, ed. V. L. Ménage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973);

Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008);

Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004);

Muḥammad Jamīl Bayhum, *The Philosophy of Ottoman History* (Beirut: Kunūz, 2014);

Muḥammad Farīd Bey, *History of the Sublime Ottoman State* (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1993);

Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson, *Tableau général de l'Empire othoman* (Paris: Didot, 1787–1824)

The issue is that all opposing circles, whether orthodox Sunnis or heretics, viewed the central authority as responsible for the social crises in which they found themselves. Thus, the Sunni Islam that, in the hands of the central authority, was transformed into a political instrument and occasionally a means of oppression, became synonymous with that central authority and its officials. Consequently, the events recorded in Ottoman religious history were not the result of religious causes or theological disputes, but rather social events that employed religious expression to articulate their reality in accordance with the circumstances of time and place. Both official Islam and popular Islam were used by the ruling power and by those who opposed it alike as ideological vehicles of self-expression. By ‘official Islam’ we do not mean Sunnism alone, nor by ‘popular Islam’ merely heterodoxy; rather, we refer to politicized Islam versus Islam as a social way of life.⁶

Ocak distinction between “politicized Islam” and Islam as a lived social practice is particularly valuable. It captures the relationship between law, religion and governance. From his viewpoint, the relation between these bodies is shaped by legal norms, institutional continuity and administrative practices. Examining Ocak’s argument through this lens, clarifies the intersection between Ottoman Islam and political authority and reveal a more complex relationship between legal authority and political governance.

This institutional reading is consistent with broader reassessments of early modern Islamic governance, which argue that religious authority in imperial contexts was shaped through legal hierarchies and administrative negotiation rather than ideological domination⁷. It is important to note that when the Ottoman state emerged, the Turks were relatively new to Islam and operated within a broader Islamic world marked by the fragmentation of political authority in the post-Abbasid period. In this context, the Ottomans articulated their legitimacy through Islamic legal norms and institutional patronage rather than claims of theological supremacy. This positioning allowed them to integrate religious authority into governance while maintaining administrative coherence⁸. This institutional structure reinforces the argument that religious authority operated within a legally defined framework that both supported and constrained political power Colin Imber’s detailed study of Ebussuud Efendi illustrates how the office of the Shaykh al-Islām* functioned as a key legal authority whose interpretations shaped both judicial practice and state regulation, operating within an established Islamic legal tradition rather than under direct political control. Its head was known as the Mufti, later the Mufti of Istanbul, and eventually the Shaykh al-Islam. The Mufti issued *fatwās* (legal opinions) on major state matters, war and peace, treaties, and critical public issues, and his rulings carried binding force. The state also prioritized spiritual mobilization and the religious education of its army, as established by the founders Orhan, Murad I, and Mehmed the Conqueror⁹

Historian Halil İnalcık asserts that the sultans always feared religious leaders, especially the popular Sufi shaykhs and dervishes, whom they regarded as potential instigators of rebellion. Hence, he argues, the rulers sought to contain them through persuasion or coercion since they were often the driving force behind opposition movements. However, the Armenian orientalist Ignatius Dohsson offers a counterview: Whether in matters of peace or war, political systems or military laws, punishment of ministers or generals, Turkey always turned to the Mufti for a *fatwā*. The state would often consult with him and with leading scholars before issuing any decree not

⁶ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak et al., *The Ottoman State: History and Civilization*, vol. 2, 2nd. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture [IRCICA]; Cairo: Al-Shorouk International, 2011), 215

⁷ Zilfi, *Politics of Piety*.

Burak, *Second Formation*.

⁸ Ocak et al., *Ottoman State*.

⁹ Al-Shanāwī, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Muḥammad. *The Ottoman State: An Islamic State Falsely Accused*. Vol. 1. Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Library, 2010.

merely to ensure legality, but to affirm the necessity of religious endorsement, particularly from the chief of the 'ulamā'.¹⁰

This indicates that the judicial authority of the empire was under his independent jurisdiction. The sultans and princes did not interfere in his duties; on the contrary, they reinforced his authority. This suggests that religious authority functioned as a legitimate constraint on political power rather than merely a tool of it.

1.2. The Testament of Osman Gazi to His Son Orhan and the Development of the Religious Institution

Historical sources attest to the existence of a testament attributed to Osman Gazi and addressed to his son and successor, Orhan. Rather than functioning as a moral or religious statement, the testament outlines principle of governance grounded in scholarly advice, legal authority, and administrative duty. Its significance lies not in its rhetorical form, but in its articulation of an early Ottoman model of governance grounded in legal authority and scholarly guidance. This approach would later be formalized through the creation of judicial offices and the inclusion of religious scholars within the Ottoman state's administrative structure. As Baki Tezcan describes this period as the formative phase of Ottoman political thought, as legitimacy was constructed through legal and scholarly discourse rather than through the sacrifice of kingship¹¹

2. Manifestations of the Ottoman Sultans' Concern for Religious Rituals

2.1. Construction of Mosques and Grand Congregational Complexes

The construction of mosques and large congregational complexes was a key part of Ottoman city and administrative policy. These architectural projects went beyond just religious purposes. They were connected to larger systems of governance through endowments (*waqf*), schools, and courts¹². These complexes served as administrative centers, strengthening the state's presence in urban areas. They also provided religious, educational, and social services. This pattern demonstrates that religious architecture functioned as an extension of Ottoman governance, not merely as a place of worship. Amy Singer's research on Ottoman *waqf* institutions highlights that religious endowments worked as tools for imperial administration and social support. They linked faith to governance in a structured way¹³. Mosque thus functioned within a semi-autonomous institutional framework: while they reinforced state authority, their organization through *waqf* granted them a degree of autonomy beyond state control. Mosque construction should therefore be understood not merely as religious patronage, but as a structured institutional mechanism through which the Ottoman state integrated religious authority into administrative governance, reinforcing urban legitimacy and public welfare.

2.2. The Proper Application of Islamic Sharī'a

In the Ottoman state, the application of Sharī'a operated through institutionalized judicial structures rather than ideological enforcement¹⁴. Judges (*qādis*) followed established procedural norms within a regulated legal hierarchy, ensuring consistency and administrative oversight. As court records and juristic writings analyzed by Burak and Peirce, demonstrate, legal practice focused on matters such as personal status, property, contractual relations, and public order. This

¹⁰İnalcık, Halil. *The History of the Ottoman Empire: From Rise to Decline*. Translated by Muḥammad al-Arnā'ūt. Beirut: Dār al-Madār al-Islāmī, 2002.

¹¹ Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire*

¹² Munajjim Bāshī, Aḥmad ibn Luṭfullāh. *Jāmi' al-Duwal (The History of the Ottoman Empire)*. Vol. 1. Edited by A. A. Aqja et al. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2020.

¹³ Singer, Amy. *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence: An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

¹⁴ Āṭıl, Ātik, et al. *The Ottoman State: History and Civilization*. Vol. 2. 2nd ed. Edited by Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. Translated by Şālīḥ al-Sa'dāwī. Istanbul: Al-Shorouk International and IRCICA, 2010.

emphasis allowed Sharī'a to function as a legal framework for governance without establishing a theocracy¹⁵

2.3 The Establishment of the Office of Shaykh al-Islām

From Osman I onward, Ottoman rulers relied on the advice of scholars and jurists and held them high status within the political hierarchy. Learned figures were close to the throne, appointed to important positions, and supported through endowments and salaries. Over time, the role of Shaykh al-Islām became one of the most prestigious positions in the Ottoman administrative system.

Shaykh al-Islām had the power to issue fatwās that could override the sultan's decree; in case of conflict, the opinion of Shaykh al-Islām would take effect. The court protocol highlighted the exceptional respect given to this office, when the Shaykh al-Islām entered the imperial court, the sultan would step forward seven steps to greet him, whereas he would take no more than three steps for other officials. In addition, a high-ranking officer was assigned to help the Shaykh al-Islām wear his official robes. The office was officially established during the reign of Sultan Murad II. The notable scholar Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī was appointed in 828 AH (1425 CE) as the first official Shaykh al-Islām.

This development reflected the sultan's recognition of the urgent need for religious authority that possesses spiritual, moral and scholarly legitimacy. This authority is capable of issuing legal opinions for both the state and its people. Prior to Shaykh al-Islām formal establishment, these responsibilities were handled by the *qāḍī 'asker* (Military Judge). This position was split into two jurisdiction -Anatolia and Rumelia- the responsibilities were distributed, and the office of Shaykh al-Islām was created. At the same time, the court introduced the post of Lala Efendi, the sultan's tutor. This institutional arrangement supports the argument that religious authority operated within a defined legal framework that both interacted with and legitimized political authority, rather than functioning as a simple extension of it¹⁶

2.4. Islamic Ceremony upon Accession to the Throne

The accession ceremony primarily served as a symbolic means of strengthening dynastic continuity and political legitimacy within the existing imperial framework. It was not a religious act that granted divine authority, however, a political tradition for Ottoman sultans upon ascending the throne to proceed in the mosque¹⁷ This indicates that the religious presence of such events operated as a remark of moral legitimacy and social cohesion rather than religious rituals. This supports the argument that religious authority operated within a defined legal framework that legitimized political authority rather than functioning as a mere extension of it.

2.5. The Ottomans, the Arabic Language, and the Arab Provinces

Historian Albert Hourani, in *A History of the Arab Peoples*, challenge the narrative of Arab culture marginalization, he wrote "the importance of the Arabic language did not decrease under Ottoman rule; in fact, it may have strengthened. Religious and legal studies were taught in Arabic in the great madrasas of Istanbul, just as they were in Cairo and Damascus." Therefore, Arabic remained the principal language of religion and legal scholarship. Ottoman Turkish developed and was used in poetry and everyday writing; however, scholarly works in "religion, law, history, and biography continued to be written in Arabic." Hourani further observes that Arabic continued

¹⁵ Peirce, Leslie. *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Burak, *Second Formation*.

¹⁶ Al-Ḥanbalī, Muḥammad al-Kāmil, and Muḥammad Wafā' al-Ḥanbalī. *Necklaces of Gold in the Virtues of the House of 'Uthmān*. Beirut: Dār al-Lubāb, 2019

¹⁷ Al-Shanāwī, *The Ottoman State* page 66

to dominate works in *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, history, and biography, including the major writing of the Ottoman scholar and official Kâtip Çelebi (Haji Khalifa) (1609–1657) who wrote in both languages, but his most significant works, including his “universal history and his bibliographical encyclopedia *Kashf al-Zunūn*,” were written in Arabic. This indicates that Arabic was not marginalized, however, it remained central to religion and legal and functioned as a unifying scholarly idiom across the empire.

Hourani further observes the development of Arabic speaking provinces following the incorporation into the Ottoman empire. He attributes the population growth to “the empire's stability and overall prosperity.” Major Arab cities were among the largest in the empire after Istanbul. Cairo's population. In addition, military elites and governors invested in major public works in urban centers, such as building mosques, *madrasas*, and commercial buildings. The Ottomans decision to preserve most of the Mamlūks administrative framework of *Bilād al-Shām* (Significant Syria), with only slight changes in terms: the *niyābah* (deputyship) was renamed an *eyalet** (province), and the *nā'ib* (deputy governor) became a *wālī* (governor) reflects the institutional strategy and suggest that the Ottoman governance in the Arab provinces relied on enforcing existing religious and social infrastructure rather than imposing new models of control. The Ottoman state integrated Arab provinces into the imperial system while preserving the local institutional norms¹⁸.

3. The Ottomans and the Followers of Other Religions within the State ahl al-dhimmah

It is essential to clarify the meanings of the terms “millet” and the so-called *millet* system, as these concepts have been misunderstood in popular and scholarly literature which led to the misinterpretation of Ottoman governance. The word “millet” is of Arabic origin, borrowed from Hebrew, which in turn was adopted from ancient Aramaic. In Aramaic and Hebrew, it means “word” (Logos), and the “word” represents the pen. It also refers to a group, sect, or community united by a shared faith in a divine religion and therefore denotes creed or belief. The title given to the spiritual leader of a millet was derived from a combination of two Greek words, Ethnos and Arhon, forming Etnah, meaning “chief of the millet.”¹⁹

Within the Ottoman society, the millet functioned as an institutional form of communal organization rather than a theological category. Religious communities were recognized as bodies governed by their own spiritual leaders that exercise authority “not only in religious matters, but also in administrative, legal, and educational affairs”. This arrangement allows the Ottoman state to govern diverse populations efficiently. Thus, autonomy granted to religious communities was not absolute, but structured within a hierarchy that ultimately preserved imperial authority. Importantly, the term millet and its plural *milal* in the Ottoman Empire differ from the modern use of millet in the Turkish political discourse, where it means “nation”, a word of Latin origin (nation), corresponding to the Greek Ethnos²⁰ This reflects the transformation from imperial to nationalist framework of governance.

The historical development of this system was shaped by pro-Ottoman conditions. Prior to the arrival of the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia, the Christian communities were already divided into

¹⁸ Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. Translated by Anīs Ṣaqr. Beirut: Dār Ṭalās, 1997.

(*) The term eyalet derives from the Turkish word eyālet, meaning rule, administration, or authority. It represented the largest administrative division in the Ottoman state. Administratively, the Ottoman Empire was divided into eyalets, which were subdivided into sanjaks, then into districts (qaḍā'), followed by subdistricts (nāḥiyas), and finally villages. Each eyalet was governed by a Beylerbeyi (literally “commander of commanders”), who functioned as a governor-general. From the sixteenth century onward, many of these governors were ministers who represented the sultan and combined both administrative and military authority over the eyalet, exercising extensive powers except in judicial matters.

¹⁹ Ilber Ortaylı, *The Ottomans in Three Continents*, trans. ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Abd Allāh, 1st ed. (Ain al-Tineh, Lebanon: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2014), bk. 3, 63–64.

²⁰ Ilber Ortaylı, *The Ottomans in Three Continents*, page 66

several large and small churches, many of which had experienced marginalization under the Byzantine Orthodox rule. The Orthodox Church was the official state church of the Byzantine Empire, but it conflicted with various Eastern sects, such as the Armenian Gregorian, Syriac, Jacobite, and Nestorian churches, which it deemed heretical. The Ottomans offered these groups a degree of protection and institutional recognition, which consequently led to cooperation and accommodation rather than resistance. These groups supported Turkish sovereignty, and many of their members migrated westward into Anatolia, settling in Turkmen emirates, where Sufi sheiks and dervishes maintained good relations with them²¹. This historical background shows that millet arrangement developed through engagement with the existing religious and social realities rather than being invented from nothing.

Analytically, the millet system should be understood as an administrative mechanism rather than a purely theological framework. It was designed to manage religious diversity through flexibility rather than uniformity. Its operation depended on local demographics, fiscal priorities, and the strength of central authority. As Barkey argues, the Ottoman Empire managed confessional diversity through flexibility and negotiation. This variability also reflected shifting imperial priorities, making the millet system a dynamic institutional arrangement rather than a fixed administrative model²².

This institutional flexibility also characterized the Ottoman approach to conquest and governance. Contemporary sources portray the early Ottoman conquests as comparatively restrained, emphasizing justice and order rather than indiscriminate violence. When the Ottoman state stabilized, the Ottomans followed the example of the Rightly Guided Caliphs in governance and conquest²³. The book *Sultans of the Ottoman Dynasty* states: “Sultan Orhan, following his father Osman’s path and that of the Caliphs, treated the conquered with justice. When he entered Iznik, he ensured the safety of its inhabitants, gave them the option to stay or leave, and protected their property”. Such practice reinforced the empire’s strategy of integrating diverse populations into a unified, imperial legal and administrative authority while preserving their communal identity.²⁴

When the Ottomans defeated the Serbs during the reign of Murad I in 773 AH (1371 CE), King Louis the Great of Hungary sought to dominate the Danube region and subjugate the Orthodox Slavic peoples, including the Serbs, Bosnians, and Bulgarians. Under his protection, Latin Church clergy tried to impose Catholicism upon these Orthodox peoples with papal support, which alienated the Balkan Orthodox Christians from Hungary and the Latin Church. This religious coercion weakens the Hungarian authority. This created an opportunity for the Ottomans, who adopted a policy of tolerance and conciliation, guaranteeing the faiths and cultures of diverse peoples. Thus, many Balkan communities regarded Ottoman rule as a protection against religious persecution. Even the Byzantine Emperor John V recognized Ottoman suzerainty in 773 AH (1371 CE)²⁵. Such recognition reflects the perception of Ottoman authority as a stabilizing force rather than a purely conquering power. This explains why the Ottomans employed Orthodox Christians, particularly Slavs, in the military. These examples demonstrate that Ottoman policies toward non-Muslims were shaped primarily by administrative pragmatism and legal norms, reinforcing the argument that governance operated through institutional flexibility rather than rigid ideological control.

²¹ Ocak, Ahmet Yaşar, et al. *The Ottoman State: History and Civilization*. Page 163-164

²² Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World*

²³ Bayhum, Muḥammad Jamāl. *The Philosophy of Ottoman History*. Beirut: Kunūz for Publishing and Distribution, 2014.

²⁴ Ibid, 152

²⁵ Sālim, Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm. *The Ottomans and the Eastern Mediterranean: A Study in the Origins of International Conflicts in the Middle East*. Doha: Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, 2021.

Moreover, the Ottoman conquerors were content with sovereignty and tribute payments, often leaving conquered territories with a degree of autonomy. This practice indicates that political control was the primary objective of Ottoman expansion, not religious transformation. For instance, Sultan Murad I reinstated his captive, King Sisman of Bulgaria, as ruler over half his former realm. Likewise, Bayezid I reinstated Prince Stefan, son of Lazar, as ruler of Serbia after its conquest. This indicates that the Ottomans ensured the continuity of local administration by preserving the existing ruling elites while integrating these regions into the imperial order.

After Mehmed the Conqueror captured Constantinople on May 29, 1453, he invited the dispersed Greeks to return to their homes, promising freedom of religion and protection of their properties and wealth²⁶. His tolerance toward foreign clergy reflected Islamic legal principles governing the protection of non-Muslim communities. This occurred at a time when Europe was torn by sectarian strife, where people were persecuted for doctrinal differences,²⁷ apart from Hagia Sophia; all other churches remained under Greek control, and they enjoyed religious and administrative autonomy while paying the *jizya* (poll tax, excluding clergy) and *kharāj* (land tax)²⁸. This arrangement illustrates how Ottoman authority transformed conquest into governance by merging religious communities within the legal system that balance imperial control with communal autonomy.

When Patriarch Gregory fled Constantinople before the conquest in 1450²⁹. Mehmed II gathered the Orthodox clergy to elect a new patriarch. They chose George Scholarius³⁰, known as Gennadius II. The Sultan personally approved of the election and attended the installation ceremony, in accordance with Byzantine tradition³¹. He handed the patriarch the scepter and declared, "I grant you the privileges your predecessors enjoyed." From that day, the patriarch became the official head of the Greek Orthodox nation within the Ottoman Empire, holding a rank equivalent to that of a minister³², with Janissary guards and full authority over civil and criminal cases, among the Greeks, assisted by a clerical council exempt from taxation³³. The Sultan also issued a *firman*³⁴ (decree) to the Genoese Catholics, allowing them to retain jurisdiction over their civil affairs and exempting them from all taxes except the *jizya* owed by the People of the Book. Through this institutional recognition, religious leadership transformed into an intermediary authority that linked Christian communities to the Ottoman state.

The Ottomans' strength did not lead them to disregard religious freedom. In fact, when Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror was criticized for not forcing his Christian subjects to choose between converting to Islam or being killed despite his notable power and might, he made his famous statement: "The Christian religion within the borders of the Ottoman Empire was like a rich and intricate mosaic, full of diversity." This response reflects the state's view of power bounded by legal and ethical norms rather than coercion. Therefore, during the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, Ottoman centralization played a key role in organizing this mosaic within certain churches, thereby linking them to the state's central authority. This authority accepted diversity and regulated it through institutional structures.

²⁶ Ibid, 123

²⁷ Harb, Muḥammad. *The Ottomans in History and Civilization*, pp. 82–83.

²⁸ Bayhum, Muḥammad Jamāl. *The Philosophy of Ottoman History*, 123

²⁹ Ocak, Ahmet Yaşar, *The Ottoman State: History and Civilization* pp. 165–166.

³⁰ Farīd Bey, Muḥammad. *History of the Sublime Ottoman State*. 7th ed. Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1993.

³¹ Ibid, 165

³² Arslan, Sulaymān. *History of the Ottoman State*. Edited by Ḥasan al-Samāḥī Suwaydān. Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2011.

³³ Farīd Bey, Muḥammad. *History of the Sublime Ottoman State*, 165

³⁴ A *firmān* was an official written sultanic decree issued in relation to a specific case. It was drafted in *divānī* script at the Imperial Council (Divān-ı Hümāyūn), and a summary of it was recorded in the council's register. A *firmān* typically included the sultan's *tughra*, the type of decree, the reason for its issuance, its stated purpose in explicit terms, and the date. In some instances, a marginal note written in the sultan's own hand was appended to the *firmān*.

At that time, there were already two Armenian Gregorian patriarchates in Erevan and Jerusalem, but Sultan Mehmed established a third patriarchate in Istanbul. The motivation behind this move was likely political caution. This is supported by the fact that, in 1461 CE, the Ethiopian, Coptic, and Syriac churches were also placed under the authority of this new Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul. Under this structure, the central Ottoman government placed these churches under its protection and supervision, a relationship that continued until the 19th century, when the central authority in Istanbul began to weaken. It is also worth noting that among these communities, there were Armenian Catholics, Syriac Jacobites, Maronites, Melkites (Greek Orthodox), and Coptic Catholics. This arrangement reflects the coherence of the Ottoman institutional approach to religious governance and illustrates how the Ottomans relied on adaption rather than rupture.

The Jews had also lived in Anatolia since Seljuk times, mainly concentrated in urban trade centers. Their numbers increased significantly after their expulsions from France (1394), Bavaria (1470), and especially Spain (1492). Many settled in cities such as Thessaloniki, Izmir, and Istanbul, where a Chief Rabbinate was established to connect the Jewish community to the central Ottoman government. The Jewish population was internally diverse and was divided into three main sects: Rabbanites, Karaites, and Samaritans³⁵

In practice, the religious freedom exercised by the Ottomans was nothing but an application of Islamic law, which forbids coercion in matters of faith and protects the rights and property of *dhimmīs* (non-Muslim subjects). This legal principle had a positive impact on minorities, it facilitated policy of inclusion as reflected by the participation of some Christian commanders, such as Michael, and others who fought alongside the Ottomans. Large-scale forced conversion was not a defining policy of Ottoman governance, although pressures, incentives, and local variations existed in certain periods and regions. Ottoman law reserved sovereign offices such as governor, judge, or provincial ruler for Muslims, yet allowed non-Muslims to hold executive or technical posts such as physicians, water distributors, and judges in disputes within their own communities. From the Empire's earliest days, Armenians, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs served in the military as *Lagator* (Bulgarian battalions), *Martos* (fortress and mine guards), and *Venok* (Christian soldiers, mostly Bulgarians, tending the horses of officials). They also held administrative posts and worked as tax collectors (*tīmār holders*)³⁶. This illustrated their integration into the imperial system.

Edward Said argued that Western historiography often projects Christian historical categories on Islamic governance, a critique that is particularly relevant to the study of Ottoman state. Many interpretations of Ottoman political authority have been shaped by assumptions derived from European experiences of church-state relations³⁷, which do not actually translate to Islamic legal and institutional frameworks. By examining Ottoman religious institutions within their own legal and administrative contexts, this study aims to reassess such interpretations and to determine whether the Ottoman state functioned as a theocracy or rather as a political system structured around Islamic legal institutions³⁸. This approach reflects recent historiographical calls to examine Islamic governance through its legal and institutional framework, rather than through models shaped by European experience (Tezcan; Barkey).

Conclusion

This study has argued that the Ottoman relationship with religion is best understood through institutional practice rather than through rigid ideological labels. The empire neither

³⁵ Ocak, Ahmet Yaşar, *The Ottoman State: History and Civilization* pp. 165–166.

³⁶ Kondūz, Aḥmad Ārif, and Selçuk Öztürk. *The Unknown Ottoman State*. Istanbul: Scientific Research Foundation, 2008.

³⁷ Edward W. Said, **Orientalism** (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978)

³⁸ Al-Kaylānī, Ibrāhīm. *Is the Islamic State a Theocracy?* Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 2014.

embodied a classical theocracy nor reduced religion to a mere political tool. Instead, Ottoman governance operated through a negotiated structure in which the sultanate, the judiciary, the Shaykh al-Islām, *waqf* institutions, and communal administrations each exercised distinct yet interconnected forms of authority. Authority was thus distributed across multiple institutional bodies each was operating within defined legal and administrative parameters.

The evidence examined here demonstrates that Islamic law functioned primarily as a legal and administrative framework that structured governance, rather than a doctrinal system imposed from above. Religious institutions on the other hand were integrated into the imperial order however, retained a degree of autonomy shaped by historical context, provincial condition, and political circumstance. Similarly, the management of non-Muslim communities reflected pragmatic strategies of imperial governance grounded in legal accommodation, institutional mediation and administrative flexibility rather than simple tolerance on one hand and coercion on the other hand.

By highlighting the role of institutional balance, this study contribute to broader debates on premodern state formation and sovereignty. It suggests that Ottoman political authority derived its durability from its capacity to integrate diverse legal traditions, religions, social actors, and communal structure into a coherent system of governance. Ottoman sovereignty was produced through institutional balance, legal legitimacy, and administrative flexibility rather than purely ideological or theological foundations.

A limitation of the present study is its primary focus on central institutions and normative legal frameworks with less attention to provincial implementation and local variation. Further research could address this gap by examining how these institutional arrangements were interpreted and contested at the provincial level, enriching our understanding of the relationship between religion, law and governance in the Ottoman Empire.

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