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Catholics in the Ottoman Empire: Western Remarks from the Seventeenth Century

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ABSTRACT

The status of religious minorities in an Islamic state is now, probably more than ever, a most delicate and interesting topic. Recent conflicts in the Middle East have once again drawn the world's attention on religious persecution, a problematic which Western society thought to have resolved in the twentieth century. The major conflicts of the previous century were in essence void of any serious religious issues. Now, with the rise of the so-called Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq, the topic of religious tolerance is once again put into discussion.

This study aims to analyze the status of religious minorities in an Islamic state in the early modern period, by presenting the case of Catholics in the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the seventeenth century. It is a known fact that in the pre-modern Islamic world Christians and Jews could practice their faith freely, due to their recognition in the Quran as being "Peoples of the Book". This meant that the Jewish and Christian nations received God's message in the past in the form of revealed scripts, but since then they have distanced themselves from His original word. Thus, even though they were sinners in the eyes of Muslims, these two monotheistic faiths were nevertheless accepted by Islam, if they agreed to some regulations.

Even though Venice had a long tradition of commercial relations with the Ottomans, it was France that would leave the strongest mark on early modern Muslim-Christian relationships. In the capitulation granted to king Henry IV in 1604, sultan Ahmed I acknowledged the former's religious protectorate over the clerics and pilgrims in Palestine. This was the first time that a European state could actually interfere in the internal policies of the Ottoman state and exert protection over its' subjects. This practice will become more and more frequent from the late eighteenth century onwards when the weak Ottoman Empire accepted other Christian powers' protectorate over Ottoman subjects.

The English on the other hand were rather late arrivals in the Eastern Mediterranean diplomatic scene. Having obtained their first capitulations in 1580, by the early seventeenth century their presence in the Levant was still considerably when compared to those of Venice and France. Even so, Englishmen started to travel and write extensively about the Ottoman Empire

and it is these works that make up the primary sources for this study. Protestant English attitudes towards Catholics and Catholicism tended to be naturally hostile due to the delicate religious situation in England at the turn of the seventeenth century. One of the main observations made by these travellers was that whilst Catholic monarchs were persecuting different religions throughout their domains, especially Protestants, the Ottoman Sultan showed a high degree of religious tolerance, allowing the practice of many different faiths in the territories they controlled. The English were astounded by the many different Christian denominations found in the Levant, as well as by the Jews, Druze or Yazidis.

But the same English authors that upheld the sultans as champions of religious tolerance often blamed them for maintaining their Christian population in a state of subjugation. Some also noted that this was actually by which the Ottoman state ruled over its entire population, not only its non-Muslim one. Different reasons such as a crusading mentality or actual fluctuation in the status of Christians from region to region can explain these contradictory attitudes. What is certain is that even though they were discriminated by the more numerous Muslim population, Christians and Jews could practice their faith, had access to justice and were overall well integrated in the Ottoman society, even though on the lowest scale. Compared to other pre modern states, the Ottoman Empire was a good example of religious tolerance. When applying this term to a historical period we always have to keep in mind its historical meaning and context, and must not apply our twenty first century understanding of religious freedom to distant eras. French authors also noted the tolerance shown by the Ottomans, although they didn't make any comparisons with the Catholic world from which they came from.

Another important aspect observed by foreign travellers to the Ottoman Empire was the differentiation made between Ottoman non-Muslims and foreign ones. An English traveller wandering through the desert alongside an Armenian caravan was singled out by the local authorities not because of religious differences, but because he was a foreigner. Outlanders who came to Jerusalem as pilgrims or simple visitors always had to accept the Franciscan monks' patronage and seek shelter at their convent. The Catholics' presence in the Holy City was so powerful that the ones who tried to avoid this habit were likely to be put in prison. Some Englishmen learned this hard truth on their own, whilst other more prudent ones abided the rules.

Western travel accounts give us important, but still partial information about the status of Catholics in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century. This must be correlated with data extracted from Ottoman accounts in order to create a better understanding of the problematic. It is necessary to understand whether or not their sultans followed a consistent policy towards non-

Muslims throughout their domains, as well as through time. The most important thing is that even though with its imperfections and tales of discrimination, the pre-modern Islamic society of the Ottoman Empire allowed non-Muslims to practice their faith, something that present day religious fanatics don't seem to be able to accept.