

BETWEEN SCHISM AND LOYALTY: THE BORDERS OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE AND NATIONAL CHURCHES

Ayça Baydar, Umit Eser

Abstract: *The paper questions what made the members of the same church turn against each other and at what point they established their own Church by revolting against the patriarchate that they once belonged to. The paper compares the two examples, formations of the Bulgarian Exarchate and the Turkish Orthodox Church, both of which separated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. However, while the former formalized into a national church by gaining its community's support, the latter got stuck between rival political centers and did not transform into a national church. While the former was a successful attempt to build a national church, the latter failed in the process. Again, while the former constituted a movement to establish the first national church within the Orthodox ecumene of the Ottoman Empire in the long 19th century, the latter is a painful process in which nationalism and violence went hand in hand vis-a-vis the last remaining Christian communities in Anatolia. The comparison finally aims to analyze the key elements of intra-church conflict and a final division.*

Keywords: *Bulgarian Exarchate, Turkish Orthodox Church, National Identity*

Introduction

In pre-national contexts, religion instead of ethnicity was the main source of identity, and it did not only define the 'self' but also the 'other.' In the Ottoman Empire the non-Muslim religious minorities were represented through the *millet* system,¹ which referred to the administrative arrangements granting non-Muslims administrative autonomy and religious freedom.² The term *millet* did not have a prevailed employment unto the 19th century, when the reforms prepared for the use of this term. Nonetheless, the relatively rare usage of the term in Ottoman documents does not mean the non-existence of autonomous religious communities in the Empire. In general, the term *millet* is under debate in a very formalist perspective within Ottoman historiography. The Imperial

¹ It initially meant "religious community," but after the nineteenth century it was also used to mean "nation" and "nationality."

² Levy 2010.

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Edict (*Hatt-ı Şerif*) in 1839 and the Reform Decree in 1856 (*Islahât Hatt-ı Hümayûnu*) were just affirmations of the de facto autonomous non-Muslim communities. Some researchers argue that the term millet was not considered a valid term in the cizye registers, court orders, and *mühimme defteris* (estate registers).³ However, even in the pre-19th century period, the term millet was being used by the Ottoman bureaucracy as millets were recognized as empire-wide religious communities by the end of the 16th century.⁴ The institution of autonomous religious communities and their rights had appeared, nonetheless, in the phase of initial social construction of the Empire; namely between the onset of the 15th and that of the 16th century. Before the end of the 16th century, the local non-Muslim communities had already become autonomous, self-reproducing, and isolated from one another. Their autonomy was valid in and among their own spiritual, administrative, and judicial realms. The sultan did intervene in the process of the election of the religious leader of a community in some cases, but mostly in order to approve the decisions taken by that community.

In this system all Orthodox Christians namely Greeks, Serbians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Romanians, belonged to the Greek Orthodox *millet* and were known as *Rum*. The Patriarch was the head of all the Ottoman Orthodox (*milletbaşı*) but the community was Greek-dominated and Greek-speaking. However, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth century these religious communities were converted into multicultural polities first and then into a number of nation states. Each ethnic group sought to build its own ethnoreligious nation state, as nationalism was seen to be an inevitable result of the progression of history. Most of the time the “immediate other” was the rivals within the same Church more than the members of other religions. A competition was the case either among the higher echelons of the clergy or for the benefit of the cultural domination of the Church. This rivalry turned into a driving force behind the transformation of society from empire to nation-state as the national identity in fact mirrored the national Churches. At this point the paper aims to ask under what conditions, in the Ottoman context, a community establish its own Church or stayed loyal to the Patriarchate. For this reason, two communities will be discussed in a comparative manner, Bulgarian case and the Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians’ case. They both were part of Greek Orthodox *millet* experienced similar conflicts within the

³ Braude 2014, pp.70–72.

⁴ Ursinus 1962, pp. 61–64. According to Ursinus, the first *mühimme defter* mentioning “memâlik- I mahrûsada sâkin millet-i Armeniyan” (The Armenian Millet in the Well-Protected Domains, that is, the Ottoman Empire) belonged to 1591 and term millet-i Rum was used first time in a *mühimme defter* in 1757.

Church but went through very different paths. While the Bulgarian Exarchate separated from the Patriarchate, Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians stayed loyal to their Patriarch up until the Greco-Turkish War (1919-22). During the war there was an attempt of a 'Turkish Orthodox Church' despite being proven unsuccessful later on.

Background

The main criticism with the *millet-i Rum* is that the Orthodox Church was administered by more than one patriarch and each of them were independent. Even at the end of the 16th century, five

Orthodox patriarchal seats (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Peć) along with five autocephalous archbishoprics (Ohrid, Mount Sinai,⁵ Cyprus, Beirut, and Crete) existed in the Ottoman territories. Nonetheless, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople was closer to administration mechanisms and had deep-rooted relations with the sultan and the Ottoman authorities. The patriarch had resided in Constantinople where the sultan also settled after 1453.⁶ His *primus inter pares* position and closeness to *Vasileus*, Christian and Orthodox emperor, and then the Sultan, led to a tradition of governance. After 1453, the patriarch was appointed not only as a spiritual leader, but also as a civil authority in charge of the entire Orthodox Christian population, or *millet-i Rum*, in the Ottoman Empire.⁷ The Patriarchate of Constantinople had supervisory rights over other Orthodox patriarchates and monasteries such as Mount Athos and Mount Sinai.⁸ Furthermore, after the fall of Constantinople, Mehmed II obliged all Orthodox patriarchs in his realm to answer to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in their official correspondence.⁹

Commercial relations within the Balkan Peninsula had also pluralist tendencies. Majority of the population was formed by stationary peasant groups,

⁵ The autocephalous archbishop of Mount Sinai was, indeed, *hegumen* of that monastery. Later, his title was elevated to the autocephalous archbishopric.

⁶ This is not a privileged given by the Ottomans. In the Council of Chalcedon (451), *primus inter pares* (first among equals) position of the Patriarch of Constantinople had gained acceptance among the bishops of the east, see Magoulias 1970, pp. 25–27.

⁷ Bakić-Hayden 2005, p. 68.

⁸ *Külliyât-ı Kavânîn*, vol. 5, nr. 4474, April/May 1840 [h. Safer 1256]. In this document, it is stated that "(...) on account of ambient and communal supervision of those, who are the patriarchs of Constantinople over the great monasteries of Jerusalem, Mount Sinai, Mount Athos etc. (...)" ["(...) İstanbul patriği olanların Kudüs-i Şerif, Tûr-i Sînâ, Aynaroz vesâir büyük manastırlara dahi nezâret-i şâmile ve umumiyesi olmak hasebiyle (...)"].

⁹ Hattox 2000, pp.110–111.

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though members of its diaspora communities were usually mobile.¹⁰ There was a religious and linguistic pluralism in the Balkan port-cities and towns. The town of Arbanasi/Arvanitohori may be a proof of the existence of international belonging ties in the early modern Ottoman Balkans. Although the town was located at the center of traditional Slavic/Bulgarian territories, its establishment was attributed to the Vlach traders, who migrated there in the 16th century, and its inhabitants were Greek-speaking people in the 18th century. Since the town was at the crossroads of two main commercial routes, a great capital accumulation had been realized in the hands of its inhabitants in the 18th century.¹¹ Whereas Bulgarian nationalist historians claimed that the inhabitants were Bulgarians since they lived in the core Slavic/Bulgarian territories, Greek mainstream scholars asserted that they were Greek since they wrote in Greek script.¹²

Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians communities mainly settled in Cappadocia, the borders of which have changed throughout history, and so it is not possible to give a precise definition for this geographical term. For the study of the Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians, Evangelia Balta draws the line of Cappadocia according to the settlements of the Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians communities: “to the north as far as Ankara, Yozgat and Hudavendigâr; to the south as far as Antalya and Adana; to the east as far as Kayseri and Sivas, and to the West as far as the borders of Aydın Province.”¹³ The Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians population was particularly concentrated in Kayseri, Nevşehir and Niğde, but they also lived in Konya, Isparta, Burdur and Antalya.¹⁴ We learn from Western observers that Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians had been living in Anatolia since the fifteenth century. A document prepared for the Council of Basel (1431–1438), recorded that in many parts of Eastern Anatolia, clergymen, bishops, and archbishops spoke the “infidel’s language” and prayed in Turkish.¹⁵ European travelers also encountered the Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians in Istanbul and described them as “a Christian folk of the Greek faith whom Selim I had transplanted from the emirate of Karamania.”¹⁶ Ottoman contemporary observer, Eremya Çelebi Kömürcüyan

¹⁰ Kitromilides 2007, pp.133–134.

¹¹ First commercial route was stretching from Constantinople to Austrian and Polish cities through Bucharest. The second route linked Constantinople to Russian lands through Jassy.

¹² Kitromilides 2007, pp. 25–27.

¹³ Balta 2003, 26.

¹⁴ Clogg 1999, p. 119.

¹⁵ Clogg 1999, p. 118.

¹⁶ *Hans Dernschwam, Tagebuch einer Reise nach Konstantinopel und Kleinasien (1553–1555)*, cited in Vryonis 1971, p. 454.

(1637–1695), also reported that the Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians lived around and within the city walls of Istanbul, despite being Greek; they did not know Greek and spoke only Turkish.¹⁷ A Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christian author, Mauromates (1656–1740) wrote that the Greek language had been lost in Anatolia, and replaced by Turkish; therefore, he said, they could not read the “masterpieces of Greek literature.”¹⁸ All of these observers agreed on the fact that Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christian had the “wrong” language. Not unlike the other non-Greek-speaking Orthodox peoples of the Empire, the Karamanlis preferred to use their native language in church services and were opposed to the domination of the Greek clergy and predominance of the Greek language in the Patriarchate. Karamanlis complained that they were looked down upon, for their inability to speak Greek, or labeled “rural” and “lower-class.” For example, the newspaper *Aktis* wrote that the Patriarchate treated the Karamanlis like a “stepchild” (*üveymiş gibi muamele*) and labeled them as “uncivilized Karamanli” (*kaba saba Karamanlı*).¹⁹

As Jack Fairey points out, the General Regulations of 1862 (γενικοί κανονισμοί των ετών 1860–1862) increased lay participation in the administrative mechanisms of the Orthodox *millet* institutions, “but they also left power in the hands of Greek-speaking urban elites.”²⁰ Nonetheless, lay participation still remained blocked within certain areas of the administration. Following the implementation of the General Regulations, the clergy was compelled to share its former privileges over the communal institutions with the lay representatives; however, lay participation was not allowed in the election process for the members of the Holy Synod. The establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870 and the schism of 1872 motivated the religious and lay leadership of the *Rum millet* to identify a multiplicity of symbols that would stress the different ways in which members of the group were similar to each other and collectively different from others.

Karamanlis also felt isolated from the high-ranking clerical circles and complained to the community leaders about the discrimination against the Karamanlis. For example, some readers sent letters to the newspaper *Anatoli*, calling on their leaders to act upon the issue that Karamanli clergymen were excluded from high-ranking positions in the Patriarchate. Nonetheless, the Karamanli intellectual elites, as noted in *Anatoli*, countered such claims by listing the names of the Karamanlis in such positions.²¹ There were also complaints that

¹⁷ Kömürcüyan 1952, p. 2.

¹⁸ Miller 1974, p. 9.

¹⁹ “Patrikhanemiz Ahvali,” *Aktis*, February 14, 1913.

²⁰ Fairey 2015, p.175.

²¹ Benlisoy & Benlisoy 2010, p. 104.

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the community leaders were not active enough in defending the rights of the Karamanlis against the unjust practices of the Patriarch. In return, the Karamanli intellectual elites responded to these complaints by saying that: "We, the Anatolians, cannot be in a position other than being obedient to the Church and respectful to those under her governance."²² Therefore, the intellectual elites played the role of mediators and encouraged the Karamanlis to be loyal to the Patriarchate. Moreover, such criticisms and discontent with the Greek dominance among the Karamanlis never developed into calls for separation. Most of the time, their criticisms were limited to the hierarchy of the Patriarchate and the attitude of clerics there, but the institution of the Patriarchate itself was not targeted for criticism. Overall, the Karamanlis defended their rights within the Greek Orthodox *millet* not by rejecting their ties with the Patriarchate or by confronting the Church authorities, but by supporting the figures backing their own interests. For example, the Patriarch Joachim III (1878–1884, 1901–1912) was a very popular figure among the Karamanlis. *Anatoli* defended him against the voices of the opposition.²³

Indeed, establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate would introduce a novelty in Orthodox doctrine and practices. In face of the modernist challenge brought forward by the Exarchate, the main argument of the Patriarchate was that the destiny of the ecumenic Orthodox realm cannot be reduced to that of a single ethnic group or race. Nonetheless, with the formation of the Bulgarian Exarchate, a separate ecclesiastical institution based on the ethnic identity rather than territory would be established in the same political body, i. e., the Ottoman Empire, for the first time in the Orthodox realm. Additionally, ethnocentric ideas in ecclesiastical terms gained ground during the two separate terms of Ioakim III (1878–1884 and 1901–1912) in the Patriarchate. The Stambolov government employed the Exarchate as a tool to foster the development of Bulgarian national identity in the Ottoman lands, especially in the Macedonian provinces and Thrace, at the end of the 1880s. Adherence to the Bulgarian Exarchate meant to have a pro-Bulgarian orientation among the Balkan Slavs. Thus, the Ottoman statesmen had been cautious about this institution and limited the permissions for the appointment of Bulgarian bishops in the post-Berlin Treaty atmosphere.

²² "Biz, Anadoluîlular validemiz eklisiyaya itaattan ve reisi idaresinde bulunanlara hürmetten başka bir his ve fikirde bulunmayız." *Anatoli*, February 12, 1891, cited in Şişmanoğlu Şişmek, "The Anatoli Newspaper and the Heyday of the Karamanli Press," 121.

²³ The Karamanlis became vigorous advocates of Joachim III against his opponents. There were even Karamanli clerics who wrote poems for him. His opponents called the Karamanlis "low class supporters of Joachim III." See Benlisoy and Benlisoy, "Karamanlılar, Anadolu Ahalisi ve Aşağı Tabakalar: Türkdilli Anadolu Ortodokslarında Kimlik Algısı."

Moreover, the fact that the Karamanlis spoke Turkish distinguished them from the other members of the Greek Orthodox *millet*. This alone, however, could not have led them to adopt an alternative identity, since the Turkish language was associated with Islam. As stated in the previous chapters, “Turk” and “Muslim” were seen as synonymous and thus Turkish was the language of the “other,” while Greek was the “language of the Gospels.” The Karamanlis saw their native language as a burden which they would eventually have to deal with. Even in the nineteenth century, when the Karamanli elites actively flirted with the new idea of Ottomanism, they did not value the Turkish language as an essential part of their identity and encouraged the Karamanlis to acquire the Greek language through attendance of Greek-speaking schools. Furthermore, the Karamanlis were also distinguished from the Greek Orthodox by their regional identity. They had a strong sense of Anatolian consciousness, which was constantly emphasized in their self-narrative. However, this did not lessen their Orthodox identity. The Karamanlis identified themselves, first and foremost, with their religion as it was their main identifier within the Empire. In other words, while their local culture and language distinguished them from the Greeks, what they shared with them was the religion, the major factor defining their identity. Under normal circumstances they could neither separate themselves from the Greek Orthodox *millet* nor establish their own Church.

Nationalism

At the end of the 1990s, Hroch updated his model through asserting five phases for each of the non-dominant ethnic groups in accordance with the development of linguistic programs.²⁴ In Phase A, Hroch shows that “language is celebrated and defended”. A few educated scholars and bishops published several oeuvres, ranging from dictionaries to chronicles. In these oeuvres, “aesthetic value, ability to express all manner of feelings or the convey of information, and historical merits” of vernacular language were praised. These oeuvres were generally related with language and history. This phase coincided with the period of Enlightenment within the European context, whereas Paisius of Hilendar and Sophronius of Vratsa represented this stage in the Bulgarian case during the second half of the 18th century to a certain degree as well. Hroch argues that movement in Phase A does not include a political program. Continuing on to Phase B, this timeframe of the period focused mainly on “language planning and codification” as an “intrinsic part of cultural standardization”. Until the vernacular language was codified, it existed solely amongst an array of regional dialects. This period can be identified by the widespread activities of Catholic

²⁴ Hroch 1998, pp.75–80.

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and Protestant missionaries among the Bulgarian communities after the second half of the 19th century. Some indigenous scholars also contributed to this standardization process. Many Western European scholars had regarded all of the Southern Slavs (Bulgarians, Serbians, Croats, etc.) as a single monolithic ethnic group up until the 19th century.²⁵ Prior to this period, more narrow terms such as 'Dalmatian', 'Croat', 'Slavonian', and 'Bulgar' carried geographical, as well as professional meanings. The "intellectualization of national language" can be categorized as Phase C, where during the period between the 1850s and 1900s, many interconnected academic disciplines were established in the newly-founded eastern European universities. Moreover, political history, philology (historical study of language), 'national' folklore, and traditional culture (ethnology and anthropology) were considered favorites among the many disciplines that had established. Patriotic scholars whose works were ingrained in the nationalistic ideological process of the 19th century were active in

new educational institutions. All the materials in these disciplines²⁶ reflected "the unique metaphysical essence of the particular collective soul, the national Self".²⁷ Among the many manifestations of some national metaphysical essence, the dynastic glory, the revolutionary/nationalist heroism, the national characteristics of landscape, and even folk costumes were emphasized. The local leaders became the believers of the idea of the nation and tried to spread these ideas to the public. The most popular disciplines within the Bulgarian context were history, linguistics, and ethnography. Furthermore, the Bulgarian intelligentsia was extremely influential in the creation of the national culture during the 1890s.²⁸ Although the believers of a nationalist ideology still remained a small group, it would later become the basis of real agitation during the end of Phase C. The fourth and final phase, Phase D, is an "introduction of language into the schools". As the primary ideological weapons of the Bulgarian nationalist propaganda, these national schools intended to promote a *communauté de conscience* not only in the Bulgarian Principality, but also in the Macedonian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. This phase would pave the way for the problem of controlling the Orthodox community schools between Patriarchist and Exarchist communities as a part of the Macedonian Question.

With the collapse of the ecumenic Orthodox community, 'national allegiance' became a personal and communal preference.²⁹ The violent struggles

²⁵ Fine 2006, pp. 276–300.

²⁶ For further information about the nationalism in Bulgarian high school and university textbooks, Georgeoff 1966, pp. 442–450.

²⁷ Kiossev 2005, pp. 175–176.

²⁸ Penev 1994, pp. 151–162.

²⁹ In the previous centuries, people generally had allegiance to tribes, feudal lords, households

among the national leaders of Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian groups focused on maps and population statistics and each of them maintained that their own groups constituted the majority in the disputed territories of the Balkan Peninsula. In order to put an end to the disputes of maps and statistics, the Sublime Porte decided to arrange a new census with the assistance of representatives of these groups in 1906. The group, which comprised the majority of the population, could choose the priest. If the different ethnic groups were more or less in equal numbers, each group could entrust its own priest.

Violence and secular parochialism, which were the by-products of nationalism, a new western and secular ideology, posed a serious menace against ecumenic character of Orthodoxy and universalism of the Great Church of Christ. Secular states, which started to form in the Balkan Peninsula after the first two decades of the 19th century, would intervene in the realm of church.³⁰ Although the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had a reserve against nationalist ideas, the churches of the Balkan states had become apparatuses of nation-states. The churches of the Balkan nation-states owed their existence to these political units, to which they looked for aid and protection; in return, they supported the regimes and their national ideals. In other words, these nationalized churches, which welcomed their independence from the Patriarchate, became the instruments of Balkan nationalisms; however, the Patriarchate's vision was closer to that of the Ottoman reformers of the *Tanzimat*.³¹

Conclusion

Through two conflicting examples, namely Bulgarian and Karamanli cases, the proposed paper discusses the relation between religious and national identities and how these identities were transformed over time. By doing so, it tries to question the factors playing a role in institutional transformation of the Churches during the late Ottoman Empire and how this eventually turned their communities from being ethnic to national. Karamanlis and Bulgarians had similarities in terms of their demands from the Patriarchate, but also had differences regarding their geographies and identity formations. Both communities demanded to use their own vernacular in their worships and to have equal opportunities to become high ranking clerics. This led the Bulgarian community to rebel against the authority of the Patriarchate and adopt nationalism. This transformation followed the establishment of their national Church. In other

and/or religions. After the rise of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, nation emerged as the most common form of belonging and loyalty.

³⁰ Kitromilides 2007, p. 7.

³¹ Roudometof 2024, p.140.

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words, national identity was formed through intra-Church clashes. However, the Karamanli community stayed loyal to the Patriarchate and did not demand an autonomy outside of the Greek Orthodox Church. Their nationalization was not until the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922) and even with war it was never complete. Applying Hroch theory, it could be argued that Karamanlis moved to Phase B only through the war. Thus, the triggering force behind the transformation of the consciousness of these communities were different. While the Bulgarian millet was mobilized by the separatist movement of the Bulgarian Church, war was the leading incident transforming the pre-national Karamanli community. This difference is based on each community's historically distinct case and can be analyzed to understand the transformation of identities and religious belongings in the diversified Ottoman context.

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Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century,
Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ayça BaydarP, PhD
Kastamonu University, Turkey
333297@alumni.soas.ac.uk

Umit Eser, PhD
Necmettin Erbakan University, Turkey
547196@alumni.soas.ac.uk