Economic Rationale of Religious Tolerance:
Policies of the Ottoman Sultan vs. the Pope

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Abstract:

When the Ottomans ruled the Middle East and the Balkans, the Pope was the leading religious authority in the West. Whereas members of different religions lived in a "pluralist equilibrium" under the rule of the Ottoman Sultan who was also the Caliph, leader of all Muslims in the world, the Pope sought to attain monopoly position as the single supplier of religious services. The difference in attitudes and policies with regard to religious tolerance can be explained by the difference in the manner in which religious good was supplied within the two frameworks. The Catholic Church provided religion as a private good and sought new converts and eliminated rivals in order to maximize revenues. Islam under the Ottomans was supplied as a public good and relied on the existence of members of other faiths, who would contribute to fund privileges, which the followers of Islam would enjoy.

Text:

Pearl Kiosk, one of the pavilions of Topkapi Palace, home of the Turkish Sultans of Ottoman Empire in Istanbul, was located on the waterfront, on the outer walls of the Palace. The kiosk had been built near the ruined Church of the Savior. Christian subjects of the Sultan believed that the fountain in the garden of this church had miraculous curative powers. Every year, on the feast of transfiguration (6 August), the fountain would be visited by Christian Greek and Armenian pilgrims. The sick would drink from the waters of the fountain and would bury themselves up to the neck in the sand quay on the waterfront. Others would play drums and horns, eat, drink and swim. Sultan Murat III would be bemused, watching from the Pearl Kiosk, at his Christian subjects enjoying themselves while performing their carnival-like devotions. As an act of tolerance and generosity, he would scatter coins from behind the window shutters, without showing himself to them.[1]

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[1] Gülru Necipoglu, *Architecture, Ceremonial and Power The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, 1991, The Architectural History Foundation Inc, New York, New York, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, p. 231.

The benevolent attitude displayed by the Sultan, who was also the Caliph of all Muslims, toward his non-Muslim subjects was in line with the tolerant policies pursued by the Ottoman State toward non-Muslims. Following the conquest of Constantinople, the Ottoman Sultan Mohammed the Conqueror, had issued a *berat* (the word means "diploma," "honor," "distinction," or "privilege" in Arabic) which assured that no one would molest the Patriarch, that he would be exempt from taxes and that he would have personal inviolability.[2] Subsequent berats issued by successors of Muhammad II recognized:

- the freedom of conscience of the Orthodox subjects of the Sultan,
- the right for the Orthodox Patriarch to administer the church,
- the right for the Orthodox Patriarch to manage the civic affairs of the Sultan's Orthodox subjects, and
- the right for the patriarch to administer church properties.[3]

According to these berats, the practice of Christian religion would not be interfered with and the Christians would not be forcefully converted. Only an adult Christian would have the right to choose to convert to Islam. The priest of an adult Christian, who had chosen to convert to Islam, would have the right to try to have him change his mind, in the presence of his relatives. The clergy would be appointed and punished by the patriarch. Civic affairs of the Orthodox with regard to matters of marriage would be overseen by the Patriarch and inheritance, and legal disputes between the Orthodox would be settled at patriarchal courts, according to Roman and Byzantine law. The patriarch and his bishops would have a free hand in managing properties and welfare institutions belonging to the Church. The church would have the right to tax its members. The Patriarch could ride a horse, carry a staff and have a personal bodyguard.

The Ottomans pursued tolerant policies toward members of other religious groups as well. A patriarchate was set up in Istanbul for the Armenian subjects of the Sultan. Jews expelled by Catholic kings from Spain and Portugal and those who fled persecution in Central Europe were given refuge by the Ottoman rulers. Office of the "Chief Rabbi" was set up to head the Jewish community. The Armenian Patriarch and the Chief Rabbi were empowered with powers similar to those of the Orthodox Patriarch.

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[2] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 237.
[3] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 241-243.

Tolerant attitude toward non-Muslims living in their domains had been a tradition amongst Muslim states before the Ottomans. Seljuks, the Turkoman conquerors who preceded the Ottomans in Turkey, would allow the Orthodox bishops of conquered territories to keep their contacts with the Byzantine Emperor and the Patriarch in Constantinople.[4] When he conquered Jerusalem, Caliph Omar had promised Patriarch Sophronius that he would not interfere in the religious practices of the Christians and would let them manage their own affairs. The monks of Mount Sinai claimed that they possessed the "testament of prophet Mohammed" issued in 623 A.D. which assured them of their property rights and freedom of worship.[5] Such documents were perhaps not authentic, but Muslims did not doubt their authenticity and honored them. For the Arabs, Christians were "lesser breeds without the law" but Allah had not ordered their forceful conversion or extermination.[6] The Koran stated that "people of the book" (Jews and Christians) should be judged in accordance with it.[7] Accordingly, Jews and Christians (and also Zoroastrians) were allowed to run their own affairs, according to their own laws, so long as a Muslim was not concerned.[8]

The grouping of peoples according to their religion had been a tradition in the east before Muhammad. Religious minorities would be recognized as millets, or nations, which would be allowed to govern their own affairs according to their own laws and customs. The religious head of the religious group would be responsible for its administration and its good behavior towards the rulers, who would belong to a different faith. This was how the Persians had treated Jews in Achaemenid days and the Sassanids the Christians.[9]

Tradition lasts only if it is expedient in political and economic terms. The Ottomans were in effect allied with the Orthodox against a common foe, the Catholic Church. Several Byzantine emperors had sought the help of Western Christendom against the Turkish expansion into their realm, which followed the Seljuk victory at Manzikert in 1071. Yet, Western Christendom was also a threat to the Byzantine Empire. Norman Kings of Sicily had organized several expeditions against Byzantium, and the Venetian-led Fourth Crusade had set up a Latin State in Istanbul. For

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[4] Runciman, Steven, *The Great Church in Captivity, Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 80.
[5] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 238.
[6] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 238.
[7] Koran V, 51.
[8] Runciman, Steven, *The Great Church in Captivity, Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 78.
[9] Runciman, Steven, *The Great Church in Captivity, Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 78.

the Orthodox Church and for the devout Orthodox, the Catholic threat was more serious than the Turkish, as the Catholics would threaten the very existence of the Orthodox Church. Two hundred and fifty years before the final conquest of Constantinople by Turks, a Byzantine patriarch had said, "Let the Muslim be my master in outward things rather than the Latin dominate me in matters of spirit, for, if I am a subject to the Muslim, at least he will not force me to share his faith. But, if I have to be under Frankish rule and united with the Roman church, I may have to separate myself from God."[10] Along the same lines, Lucas Notaras, chief councilor of the last emperor, said, "It is preferable for us to see the Turkish turban prevailing in the midst of the city rather than the tiara of the Latin cardinal."[11]

Expulsion or conversion of all conquered peoples in lands where the conquerors are a minority is a costly process, which may not always be feasible. Tolerant attitudes toward the religious practices of the conquered had therefore been adopted by several "frontier states" out of necessity.[12] Such concessions would reduce the costs of conquest: the taxes paid by the conquered would fill the coffers of the conquerors and also fund their religious activities. The policies of religious tolerance pursued by the Ottomans and other Muslim states can be viewed in this context as well.

Tolerant policies toward Muslim minorities had been pursued by certain Catholic rulers, when in a frontier environment. James I of Arago-Catalonia (1208-76) did not attempt to convert Moors when he conquered Valencia. The French Crusader Kingdom in Jerusalem tolerated religious practices of the Muslims they ruled and discouraged missionary activities aimed toward them.[13] However, Catholic experiments in religious tolerance remain exceptional and were relatively short lived, whereas such policies seem to be the norm and were longer lasting with Muslim states. At the turn of the twentieth century, after nine hundred years of rule by Muslim Turks, more than half of the population of the land, which is now modern Turkey, were non-Muslims.

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[10] Angold, Michael, *Church and Society in Byzantium Under the Commeni,* 1081-1261, Cambridge University Press, 1995, s. 111.

[11] Ducas, *Historia Byzantina*, (Bonn ed.,), p. 264, quoted in G. Georgiades Arnakis, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 236.

[12] Halperin, Charles J., "The Ideology of Silence: Prejudice and Pragmatism on the Medieval Religious Frontier," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 26, No. 3, July 1984, p. 444-445.

[13] Halperin, Charles J., "The Ideology of Silence: Prejudice and Pragmatism on the Medieval Religious. Frontier," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 26, No. 3, July 1984, p. 444-449 and p. 455-459.

On the whole, the Catholic Church sought for monopoly in providing religious services and declaring as heretics and persecuting its rivals, whereas in Ottoman lands members of different faiths lived in what can be called "pluralist equilibrium."

The difference between the Ottomans and the Pope with regard to policies pursued toward members of other faiths can perhaps be best explained by the difference in which religion was provided within two frameworks.

- The Catholic Church provided religion as a private good, marketing and selling "a set of identifiable 'products' (salvation) in a rational, self-conscious, 'profit'-maximizing manner."[14] For the church, "new members meant new revenues" and the Church would therefore want more new members, seeking the conversion of conquered peoples belonging to different faiths.[15]
- Islam on the other hand was provided as a public good to the faithful. The equivalent of tithes, church dues, marriage fees, sale of relics or indulgences, had no place in the Islamic practice. More members for Islam meant more recipients of a public good and it was in the interest of the Muslim establishment to limit the number of entrants to Islam – by allowing conquered religious groups to continue with their practice.

In order to maintain the credibility of its product (salvation), the Catholic Church relied on " 'miracles' and other manifestations of the efficacy of religion."[16]

For the followers of Mohammad, that "Setting out from the remote east, he (Mohammed) came as far as the west, victorious," was proof of the power of Islam.[17]

To those who paid for its services, the Church promised salvation after death. Islam offered the fruits of victory to the faithful, here and now.

Decorations in the church building would be reminders of not only joys of paradise, but also of the horrors of hell, which one would have to endure if he or she did not fulfill his or her obligations toward the Church.

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[14] Ekelund, Jr., Robert B. et. al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1996, p. 6.
[15] Ekelund, Jr., Robert B. et. al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1996, p. 135.
[16] Ekelund, Jr., Robert B. et. al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1996, p. 27.
[17] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "Gregory Palamas among the Turks and Documents of His Captivity as Historical Sources," *Speculum*, v. 26, No. 1, Jan., 1951, p. 110.

The mosques had no images of hell and remained only as glorious reminders of the permanent state of bliss that the followers of Islam lived in.

The Church sought for monopoly power in the religious market place and did its best to eliminate all its rivals.

Islam relied on members of other faiths to continue to exist, to pay for the joys that the victorious faithful would enjoy.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Christians were tolerated but were more heavily taxed than Muslims. According to one author, as late as the early twentieth century, Christians were "regarded as no more than taxable assets."[18]

Appointment to church positions was in itself used as a tool of exploitation. Patriarchs would pay to ascend to the throne. Mehmet the Conqueror had made a gift of one thousand florins to Gennadius, the first patriarch he appointed. But, he discontinued this practice when, in 1467, some members of the Church offered to pay him an equal amount for the appointment of their choice. From then on, it became an accepted practice for the patriarch to make money gifts to the Sultan, later to the Grand Vizier. (Patriarchs were confirmed by the Sultan until 1657 and by the Grand Vizier after this date.) A yearly tribute was also introduced. Both amounts rose steadily over time.[19] By the end of the seventeenth century, the usual price paid by a patriarch on his election was in the neighborhood of 3,000 gold pounds. In 1726 Callinicus III paid no less than 5,600 gold pounds. An annual tax of 3,000 gold pounds was also paid as well as minor taxes, such as the mutton for palace guards. As the Ottoman rulers exploited the chance to make money, as many as sixty-one changes of patriarchs between 1595 -1695 took place.[20] Wealthier bishops would have higher chances of being elected, even if they were less holy than their rivals. Poor but ambitious bishops would borrow from guilds or moneylenders in order to pay for their office.[21] After 1759 it was decided that the gift would be paid out of church funds.[22] By the time of Greek independence the church was 230,000 gold pounds in debt.[23]

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[18] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 238.
[19] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 247.
[20] Runciman, Steven, *The Great Church in Captivity, Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 1968, p.201-202.
[21] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 247.
[22] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire", *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 24, No: 3, (Sep., 1952), p. 248.
[23] Runciman, Steven, *The Great Church in Captivity, Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 1968, p.202.

Local bishops would also buy their sees and made their flock pay back what they had expended.[24] The bishop and the local Ottoman government officials would be allies. The bishop wanted the aid of the local government to compel the peasants and would render diplomatic services in return. The Bulgarian " 'prayed to be delivered from the Greeks,' who lived upon him" and the Rumanian regarded as enemies the Greek clergy who "held one fifth of the land and lived at ease in monasteries, while he died of starvation in his miserable hut."[25]

Victory had been the proof of the credibility of the faith preached by Muhammad ever since its very beginning. Islam had started out as a desert religion amongst tribal people. For the tribal Bedouin, "A god was no more than a powerful being, and the point of serving him was that he could be expected to respond by using his power in favor of his servants."[26] A deity, which did not deliver, could easily be deserted. By uniting the tribes under a single banner, Mohammed's god delivered state formation and conquest[27] and for the believers "an effortless life as rulers of the earth as opposed to one as plodding as merchants or doing other work."[28]

Early Ottoman rulers were no more than tribal chiefs who would lead their people in conquest. Early sultans refused to leave their tents to live in permanent buildings and would spend Fridays giving out alms, distributing the fruits of conquest to their people.[29] The distribution of the benefits of conquest, were rendered permanent through the system of pious foundations known as the wakf.

In the Islamic World, conversion of personal property into a wakf provided the ability to protect some or all of it from confiscation by the state, in return for investment in public goods. The mission of wakf was to benefit not only specified beneficiaries but also the founder's family. Only 29% of wakfs founded in the eighteenth century served religious functions, 25% supported schools that taught religion along with other subjects, and the rest were "worldly" that supported secular purposes.[30] Benefits would cover a wide span such as:

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[24] Miler, W., "Europe and Ottoman Power before the Nineteenth Century," *The English Historical Review*, V. 16, No. 63, July 1901, p. 469.
[25] Miler, W., "Europe and Ottoman Power before the Nineteenth Century," *The English Historical Review*, V. 16, No. 63, July 1901, p. 469.
[26] Crone, Patricia, *Meccan Trade and The Rise of Islam*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p. 238-239.
[27] Crone, Patricia, *Meccan Trade and The Rise of Islam*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p. 241.
[28] Crone, Patricia, *Meccan Trade and The Rise of Islam*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p. 243.
[29] Arnakis, G. Georgiades, "Gregory Palamas among the Turks and Documents of His Captivity as Historical Sources," *Speculum*, v. 26, No. 1, Jan., 1951, p. 113.
[30] Yediyildiz, Bahaeddin, Institution du Vakf au XVIIIe Siecle en Turquie: Etude Socio-Historique, Ankara, Turkey, Ministry of Culture, 1990, p. 82.

- Delivering water
- Defending a town
- Paying taxes for a neighborhood
- Supporting retired sailors
- Supplying food for children
- Subsidizing the cultivation of roses
- Running commuter ships

At the end of the eighteenth century, revenue from 20,000 wakfs equaled one-third of the total revenue of the Ottoman state.[31] By 1923 three quarters of arable land in Turkey, one-eighth of cultivated soil in Egypt and one-seventh of that in Iran belonged to wakfs.[32] It has been argued that the wakf system contributed to the economic descent of Islam by fostering a large class of unproductive dependents.[33]

[31] Yediyildiz, Bahaeddin, "XVIII. Asir Turk vakiflarinin iktisadi boyutu," *Vakiflar Dergisi*, 18, 1984, p. 26
[32] Kuran, Timur, "The Provision of public goods under Islamic Law: Origins, impact, and limitations of the waqf system," *Law&Society Review*, Amherst, 2001.
[33] Akdag, Mustafa, Turkiye'nin Iktisadi ve *Ictimai Tarihi*, Tekin Yayinevi, Istanbul, v. 2, pp. 128-130.