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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The "Millet" Paradigm: On Difference in the Late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

This article argues that the late Ottoman Empire saw the rise of a novel concept of difference, the "*millet*," that fundamentally reordered the lives of the empire's many subjects. Rather than a term with clearly identifiable content—"religion," "nation," "ethnicity," or otherwise—*millet* should be understood instead as auguring the emergence of history as the organizing principle of the late Ottoman politics of difference. Unlike the Islamic distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim that had previously structured Ottoman rule, the *millet* paradigm did not stipulate any predetermined set of terms through which difference had to be articulated. Instead, it issued an injunction to Ottoman subjects to merely say who they were, to declare the name they went by—to confess. This simple injunction, however, which appeared to require nothing other than assent to the reality of history itself, tended to misfire. When it did, Ottoman subjects confronted the anxious truth that history—the purported ground of the *millet* paradigm of difference—was no ground at all.

Keywords: *millet*; history; Ottoman; Middle East; sectarianism; Tanzimat; Suryani; groundlessness; difference

My central contention in this article is that, over the course of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire saw the rise and widespread adoption of a novel concept of difference that fundamentally reordered the social and political lives of the empire's many subjects. This was the concept of the "*millet*," an Ottoman Turkish term that proves difficult to translate yet is essential, I argue, to understanding changing ideas of communal difference in the late Ottoman Empire. In contemporary Turkish *millet* is generally said to connote "nation," though in the nineteenth century this specific connotation had not yet cohered, and its meaning remained considerably more ambiguous.[1] As a placeholder—and only as a placeholder—one might wish to think

[1]The term *millet* derives from the Arabic term *milla*—itself a derivation from Hebrew and Aramaic—which appears fifteen times in the Quran, most often as "*millat Ibrahim*," or the way of Abraham to God. Recep Şentürk, "Millet," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı,

of it as denoting a variety of the kind of difference conveyed by sociological categories of comparison such as "religion," "ethnicity," "nation," and "culture." Historically speaking, I argue that the *millet* concept arose as a new basis for organizing social difference in the aftermath of the collapse of Islamic tradition in nineteenth-century Ottoman governance. Once the Islamic distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim, or *dhimmi*, was no longer seen as a legitimate mode of dividing up a diverse imperial population, it was the concept of the *millet* that emerged in its stead. This transformation, momentous as it was, has yet to be clearly identified by historians, an oversight the present article seeks to rectify by establishing the existence of what I call the late Ottoman *millet* paradigm of difference. Yet beyond this, the article aims to clarify what the rise of this paradigm represented: not merely a new way of organizing difference across late Ottoman state and society, but a heightened, almost paranoiac concern with difference itself.

The rise of the *millet* concept should be understood as registering a quintessentially modern anxiety that I argue suffused the Ottoman Empire's nineteenth-century reform period, known as the Tanzimat. This reform period, traditionally understood to have been inaugurated by the Edict of Gülhane in 1839, saw the Ottoman state renounce the long-standing distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim that, like the distinction between the class of military rulers (*asker*) and imperial subjects (*reaya*), had long structured Ottoman imperial rule.[2] In place of such hierarchical distinctions, the state committed to the principle of equality between subjects, increasingly understood as something more like "citizens."[3] No longer divided according to Islamic precepts that placed Muslims and Islam over non-Muslims and their various faiths, all subjects of the Ottoman Empire—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—were reconceived as indistinguishably "Ottoman" in political identity, fully equal in the eyes of the state irrespective of religion or sect.

Yet as the present article seeks to illustrate, at the very same time that the Ottoman state began to forward this universalist vision of Ottoman citizenship, one designed to transcend the divisions of old, the Ottoman population suddenly appeared to be divided anew.[4] Just as the effort to inculcate a novel collective sense of Ottomanism

2020), https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/millet; F. Buhl and C. E. Bosworth, "Milla," in P. Bearman, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5199.

[2]M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 74. Historians have pointed out that, in practice, the distinction between the ruling *asker* and the tax-paying *reaya*—the latter a class that included Muslims and Christians as well as Jews—was more consequential to everyday life than that between Muslim and non-Muslim. Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, the term *reaya*, which originally made no distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim, began to be applied principally to Christian subjects. By the middle of the nineteenth century, both distinctions had begun to appear insufficiently modern. On the distinction between *asker* and *reaya* and its history, see Heather Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 132; Baki Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion, and Social Class: Ottoman Markers of Difference," in Christine Woodhead, ed., *The Ottoman World* (London: Routledge, 2012), 165–69; Benjamin Braude, "Introduction," in Benjamin Braude, ed., *Christians & Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Abridged Edition* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2014), 23.

[3]Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

[4]On the history and historiography of the "Ottomanist" project, see, among others, Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University

was getting underway, Ottoman administrators and subjects began to sense that the empire remained divided, no longer between Muslims and *dhimmi*s but between "*millets*." These *millets*, as diverse Ottoman actors came to understand them, were defined by differences of "religion," "ethnicity," "language," and the like, in ways that rendered the concept near impossible to define as a generic type. The Jews were a *millet* but so too were the Bulgarians, the Armenians but also the Protestants, the Orthodox (Rum) but also the Yezidis—all of these, communities whose differences did not fall along what historians today might wish to identify as a single axis of distinction ("religion," "ethnicity," "language," etc.) but several. However the concept was understood, over the course of the nineteenth century *millets* in the Ottoman Empire increasingly appeared to exist in abundance, and no one could say with any confidence how many, exactly, there were across the empire as a whole. But the Ottoman state displayed a distinct anxiety that these differences could not be ignored.

Whence the origins of what I argue was the nineteenth-century *millet* system of difference, wherein a nascent universalist "Ottoman" identity was paired uneasily with the recognition that Ottoman subjects remained divided in ways that had to be accounted for and mitigated. This mitigation took the form of granting recognized *millets* certain communal autonomies and freedoms, in addition to representation in government, which Ottoman administrators hoped would assuage the dual threat of nationalist separatism and European imperial intervention on behalf of "beleaguered" Christian minorities.[5] The Ottoman state reasoned that, by recognizing the differences between *millets* and according them differential rights and representation on this basis, it might be able to unite what now appeared to be a distinctly diverse empire. Yet unlike the difference between Muslim and *dhimmi* that had structured Ottoman rule until this point—an approach to managing difference that the Ottomans had inherited from Islamic tradition—the *millet* differences of the nineteenth century were understood as *unknowable in advance*, as requiring naming and identification on the part of Ottoman administrators as well as Ottoman subjects themselves.[6] If few required convincing that *millet* difference was real and had to be accounted for—*all* Ottoman subjects were understood to be marked by one or another form of *millet* belonging—the questions of who and what counted as a *millet*, how many *millets* there were, what was required for *millet* recognition, and how these issues were to be determined remained very much open.

Press, 2014); and Alp Eren Topal, "Ottomanism in History and Historiography: Fortunes of a Concept," in Johanna Chovanec and Olof Heilo, eds., *Narrating Empires: The Promotion and Perception of Habsburg and Ottoman Multinationalism 1848–1918* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 77–98.

[5]The Ottomans lost Greece to a separatist uprising in 1821, alerting them to the threat of territorial disintegration. Meanwhile, European powers like France and Russia threatened intervention into internal Ottoman affairs on the pretext of protecting Ottoman Christians, whom they portrayed as their "co-religionists." Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[6]One might compare this shift in Ottoman approaches to the management of difference to a shift in the meaning of "inspiration" as traced by Talal Asad: "It has been remarked that the German Higher Criticism liberated the Bible from 'the letter of divine inspiration' and allowed it to emerge as 'a system of human significances.' We should note, however, that that liberation signals a far-reaching change in the sense of 'inspiration'—from an authorized reorientation of life toward a telos, into a psychology of artistry whose *source* is obscure—and therefore becomes the object of speculation (belief/knowledge)." Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 37.

Rather than representing the substitution of one understanding of social difference for another—viz., "nation" for "religion"—I contend that the *millet* concept raised the very question of what differences actually existed in Ottoman domains, the question of the forms of collective belonging from which the cloth of a unified "Ottoman" identity might be woven. Neither "religion" nor "ethnicity," "confession" nor "nation," as various historians have translated the term, *millet* was instead an injunction to Ottoman subjects to *say who they were*, to account for their distinctiveness to a state no longer content to allow the differences between its subjects to remain obscure. But if the *millet* paradigm imposed onto Ottoman subjects a requirement to make themselves known, what rendered it such a fragile enterprise, I argue, was that it did not impose any particular ground, did not stipulate any predetermined set of categories through which *millet* difference had to be articulated. Although the concept of the *millet* served to organize social difference in the face of the void that had been opened by the foundering of Islamic tradition as the authorizing discourse of Ottoman administration, it did not designate a basis for the organization of social difference so much as it opened the question of how such a basis might be determined. In the midst of this radical indeterminacy, I will suggest, *history itself* entered the scene to secure a foundation for the *millet* paradigm of difference.

When it did, nineteenth-century Ottoman administrators confronted an empire that turned out to be more multiplicitous than they could have possibly imagined, with myriad collectives drawing on the authority of historical difference to announce themselves as *millets* to the state, demanding the rights and recognition such status entailed. Among those collectives was a small community whose name had rarely sounded in the halls of the Ottoman bureaucracy until this point, its population concentrated far from the imperial center in the northern part of ancient Mesopotamia at the intersection of today's Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. When asked, they tended to call themselves "Suryani," though the act of self-identification was one that they had to be taught rather than a spontaneous, natural occurrence. Indeed, it was a late nineteenth-century contest over the very act of naming the Suryani—a contest that takes center stage in this article—that best illustrates a contradiction that I argue suffused the *millet* paradigm of difference, namely: that while the concept of history entered the scene in order to authorize and to ground *millet* difference, history turned out to be no ground at all. As we will see, those who claimed the name "Suryani" confronted this contradiction head-on in their fight for *millet* recognition, declaring to an Ottoman imperial administration hitherto unfamiliar with their existence that "Suryani" referred to a real, historically attested form of difference. Yet the problem of ensuring that the Suryani correctly identified themselves *as* Suryani—the precariousness of the event of identification—threatened to expose the cracks in this new paradigm of difference that appeared to depend upon nothing other than the reality of history.

Sectarianism, "Millet," and the Histor(icit)y of Difference

The *millet* concept has not gone unnoticed by historians of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, who have pointed out the significant place the term held in post-Tanzimat Ottoman governance. Several recent works in particular have made important strides toward relating the spread of *millet* discourse in the nineteenth century to what Richard Antaramian has identified as the "wholesale transformation

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of the politics of difference in the Ottoman Empire."[7] The present article builds on such contributions. Yet it also seeks to clarify a certain tension that has continued to attend treatments not merely of the *millet* concept, but of the history of difference in the Ottoman Empire at large—a tension that pertains to the nature of the transformations that occurred in the realm of communal belonging, identity, and difference in the late Ottoman period. At issue is not only the historical question of what exactly this shift was and how it generated so thoroughly transformed practices and understandings of community, not to mention spectacular and unprecedented episodes of sectarian violence. There is also a larger methodological question at stake, relevant far beyond the confines of Middle East and Ottoman historiography, concerning the historian's approach to modern concepts of difference.

But before opening up this larger question, I need to address the various confusions that have troubled studies of the concept of the *millet* to date. Until the 1980s, historians wrongly assumed that the *millet* system was an old and established feature of Ottoman rule dating back to 1453, when Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror was said to have concluded agreements with the non-Muslim leaders of Constantinople upon his capture of the city. In the centuries after the conquest, it was thought, non-Muslims had benefited from wide-ranging and imperially recognized freedoms and autonomies as protected "*millets*," this in a manner parallel to the long-attested practice of the pact of *dhimma*.[8] The *millet* system, it was understood, raised the paradigm of *dhimmi* recognition to the level of the non-Muslim community as a whole, granting communally defined prerogatives to the Orthodox, the Armenians, and the Jews in particular but recognizing also the communal autonomies of non-Muslims more generally. In historiography, the idea of a *millet* system of non-Muslim administration converged nicely with a related idea that also long pervaded the literature: that the empire's non-Muslims had lived in isolation from the broader Muslim society in which they were ensconced (an idea that appealed to Orientalists eager to map the "mosaic" of Eastern religions as well as to nationalists in search of unsullied "traditions").[9]

As Benjamin Braude first argued in a seminal 1982 book chapter, however, and as myriad historians have confirmed through further investigations in the years since, the idea that the Ottoman Empire featured a *millet* system of non-Muslim administration in its classical era had no grounding in historical reality.[10] Neither the "foundation myths" according to which Mehmed the Conqueror had concluded the agreements with non-Muslim leaders after 1453, nor the notion of non-Muslim legal and cultural autarky within broader Ottoman Muslim society, could be historically substantiated. The "*millet* system," Braude discovered in his initial foray into the history of the institution, was a notion that had been constructed only much later on. The term *millet*, he argued, was not widely applied to non-

[7]Richard E. Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 17.

[8]Hamilton Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East*, vol. I, pt. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 211–12.

[9]See, for instance, Gibb and Bowen, who describe the "general organization of Ottoman society" as "essentially 'corporate,'" *Islamic Society*, vol. 1, 211.

[10]Benjamin Braude, "Foundation Myths of the Millet System," in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (London: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 69–90.

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Muslim communities across the empire until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, taking on a degree of institutional concreteness only in the context of the transformations in non-Muslim relations with the state in the late Ottoman period.

It is a curiosity of Ottoman historiography that Braude's insight has tended to generate more interest in the inapplicability of the notion of the *millet* system to the realities of earlier periods than in the transformation of which the nineteenth-century spread of *millet* discourse was the indicator.[11] For all historians' success in dismantling the myth of a *millet* system in early modern Ottoman times, there has been a marked reluctance to confront the rise of *millet* discourse in the nineteenth century, when Braude asserted the "myth" of the *millet* truly came into being.

That reluctance has recently given way to greater interest, however, and it is now clear from a growing collection of studies that the *millet* system was a decidedly modern phenomenon, one that arose in the crucible of late Ottoman reform and amid growing Western political hegemony.[12] Building on Braude's original intervention, these recent studies have pursued more detailed genealogies and conceptual-historical investigations of the *millet* concept that reveal the new meanings it acquired over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some argue that "*millet*" shed its "traditional religious associations" as it was resignified as "nation" in line with the broader "ethno-nationalization" of Ottoman society, while others contend that the term maintained a semantic instability (connoting "nation" here, "religion" there) while nevertheless reflecting a certain societal "confessionalization."[13] Yet all agree that the semantic transformation of the *millet* concept in the later Ottoman period must be related to changing ideas of community and difference on a much larger scale.

In that respect, these studies contribute to the broader effort to understand that great transformation in late Ottoman communal relations that has long occupied historians of the empire and the Middle Eastern and Balkan nations that emerged from it—a transformation with which the present article is equally concerned. Scholars have narrated this transformation in different ways and with recourse to

[11]This literature is immense. Notable contributions include: Sophia Laiou, "Christian Women in an Ottoman World: Interpersonal and Family Cases Brought before the Shari'a Courts during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (Cases Involving the Greek Community)," in Amila Buturovic and Irvin Cemil Schick, eds., *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture, and History* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Najwa Al-Qattan, "Dhimmis in the Muslim Court: Legal Autonomy and Religious Discrimination," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, 3 (1999): 429–44; Ayşe Ozil, *Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Empire: A Study of Communal Relations in Anatolia* (London: Routledge, 2013); Paraskevas Konortas, "From Ta'ife to Millet: Ottoman Terms Concerning the Ottoman Greek Orthodox Community," in Dimitri Gondicas and Charles Issawi, eds., *Ottoman Greeks in the Age of Nationalism: Politics, Economy, and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999), 169–80; Joseph Hacker, "Jewish Autonomy in the Ottoman Empire: Its Scope and Limits. Jewish Courts from the 16th to the 18th Centuries," in Avigdor Levy, ed., *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), 153–202; Halil Inalcik, "The Status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch under the Ottomans," in *Essays in Ottoman History* (Istanbul: Eren, 1998), 195–223.

[12]Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith*; Markus Dressler, "Tracing the Nationalisation of *Millet* in the Late Ottoman Period: A Conceptual History Approach," *Die Welt Des Islams* 62 (2022): 360–88; Nikos Sigalas, "'And Every Language that Has Been Voiced Became a Millet': A Genealogy of the Late Ottoman *Millet*," *Die Welt Des Islams* 62 (2022): 325–59; Fuat Dündar, "From Listing Religions to Tabulating Nationalities: Ottoman Identity Policies and Enumeration Practices," *Middle Eastern Studies* 60, 1 (2024): 16–32.

[13]Dressler, "Tracing," 363; Sigalas, "And Every Language," 352.

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various models of historiographical explanation, among them the replacement of "religious" bonds of association with "ethnic" or "national" ones; the "politicization" of older religious forms of belonging by the new nineteenth-century governing structure of the empire; and the birth of "sectarianism."[14] Often these forms of historical accounting are pursued with the aim of explaining the spectacular episodes of internecine violence that ravaged the Ottoman Empire over the course of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including in Mount Lebanon, Damascus, Macedonia, and Eastern Anatolia.

In accounting for this violence, historians have accorded particular attention to how the new concepts and understandings of communal belonging that arose in the nineteenth century—whether imposed from without or emergent within—sat in tension with pre-existing notions of community and belonging, interrogating how the latter were reconfigured and displaced by the former. Reflecting on the spread of nationalism and national systems of social classification in late Ottoman Macedonia, İpek Yosmaoğlu observed how this "new order" of terminological differentiation (the terminological order, that is, of nationhood) was "short of words to express the nuances of preexisting norms of social organization and local differences."[15] Struggling to adapt to a world increasingly organized around national distinctions, early twentieth-century Ottoman administrators devised new terms and systems of classification that neither "confirmed traditional markers of identity"—most immediately, religion or denominational affiliation—nor "comfortably accommodate[d] the sensibilities of the population."[16] It was this imposition of a novel political logic of nation and ethnicity that underlay what Kemal Karpat once argued was the "incongruity" between the essentially "religious" modes of attachment that had been regnant across Ottoman domains and the secular formations that accompanied the rise of the modern nation-state.[17] So too was it at the root of what Ussama Makdisi has argued, in his older as well as more recent work, were the "reworked communal identities" that emerged in the Arab world in the shadow of rising European colonial hegemony and the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms.

What I want to highlight about these approaches to changing concepts of difference in the late Ottoman period—a point no less applicable to the recent studies of the *millet* concept—is how their rigorous attentiveness to the historicity of modern concepts of difference betrays a certain disregard of the concept of history—that is, the historicity of history itself as a conceptual regime and mode of governance in late Ottoman society.[18] In identifying "history itself" as a "conceptual regime" and "mode of governance," I

[14]Versions of these narratives can be found in several major works on violence and community in the late Ottoman period: İpek Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties: Religion, Violence, and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878–1908* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[15]Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties*, 156.

[16]Ibid., 155.

[17]Kemal Karpat, "*Millets* and Nationality: The Roots of the Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era," in *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 611–46.

[18]On what is at stake in a history of historicity, see Nancy Levene, *Powers of Distinction: On Religion and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

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mean to call attention to a central facet of my argument: that over the course of the nineteenth century, a distinctly modern historical consciousness came to structure not merely Ottoman ideas about the past but the entire edifice of the Ottoman politics of difference. Efforts to historicize this transformation falter precisely to the extent that they fail to consider that what is at issue is historicism itself.[19]

In a study of transforming practices of history writing in the late Ottoman period, Hakan Karateke has charted the displacement of an earlier concern with Islamic eschatology—in which the Ottoman dynasty was conceived as a "chapter of Islamic history" that conformed to the "divine plan" of God and progressed toward "the end of the world, or Judgment Day"—by a new historical universalism.[20] Nineteenth-century Ottoman historians, Karateke shows, began to criticize earlier Ottoman historical accounts for failing to properly historicize "sacred history" and for disregarding "non-Islamic civilizations," the inclusion of which had come to be seen as imperative to a new and broadly inclusive concept of "world history."[21] Where prior Ottoman history writing had been structured by Islamic theological presuppositions, in the nineteenth century Ottoman historians came to approach Islam as but one civilization, one historical configuration, among many, with an attention to the multiplicity of "particular histories" (*tarih-i hususi*) being understood as necessary to proper historical understanding.[22] This new concept of history—in which contemporary historians will recognize some of the central tenets and assumptions of their own historical consciousness—came to structure not just Ottoman intellectual life but imperial administration. I need only mention briefly in this regard that Ahmed Cevdet—the "grand historian" of the late nineteenth century, in Karateke's estimation—was closely involved in adjudicating intercommunal conflicts at the highest levels of late Ottoman administration and brought his historical expertise to bear on disputes over issues such as communal property.[23]

I argue, first, that this newfound authority of history within the late Ottoman politics of difference inhered in the rise of the *millet* paradigm; and second, that if we perceive within the *millet* paradigm the rise of history, we can see how "*millet*" imposed less an historically particular concept of difference than *history itself* as the fundamental mode of conceptualizing and organizing social difference in the late Ottoman Empire. It may be true, as many have written, that the late Ottoman Empire saw the displacement of indigenous, local, or simply pre-existing concepts and categories of difference by modern ones, whether conceived as imported from Europe or produced at the nexus of a mutually negotiated Ottoman-European modernity. The work that historians have

[19]Historicism is a notoriously elusive concept. My understanding has been shaped by: Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015); Nancy Levene, "Sources of History: Myth and Image," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, 1 (2006): 79–101; Alan Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005); Johann Gottfried von Herder, "This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity," in *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, Michael Forster, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1774), 272–358.

[20]Hakan T. Karateke, "The Challenge of Periodization: New Patterns in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Historiography," in H. Erdem Çıpa and Emine Fetvacı, eds., *Writing History at the Ottoman Court: Editing the Past, Fashioning the Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 131–32.

[21]Ibid., 142–43.

[22]Ibid., 141.

[23]Ibid., 144; Henry Clements, "Documenting Community in the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, 3 (2019): 437–38.

carried out to expose the contingency of such modernist categories—a project that Dipesh Chakrabarty once called "provincializing Europe"[24]—remains important and unfinished. Yet what also requires our attention, and what the *millet* paradigm of difference seeks to identify, is not so much any particular modern concept or group of concepts that came to displace pre-existing Ottoman ones, reconfiguring diverse Ottoman life-worlds in ways both obvious and subtle in the process. It is instead the rise to power of something like the order of concepts itself—an order of comparison and commensurable difference in a world whose immeasurable diversity was held together by its common historical frame. What was so radical in this shift was less any particular concept of difference through which Ottoman subjects came to organize the world than the acts of *naming* by which they nominated its constituent parts.

The following, then, is an attempt to clarify the history, the grounds, and some of the consequences of this new paradigm of difference with reference to the term *millet.* It is important to specify that the transformation the article seeks to identify inheres not in the content of the *millet* concept so much as in the form it took across the nineteenth century—a form no less apparent in the history of myriad other terms over the same period, including *umma*, *madhhab*, *ʿirq*, *jins*, *din*, and *taʾifa* (which might be translated, somewhat perilously, as, respectively, "nation," "religion," "race," "race," "religion," and "sect").[25] To understand the *millet* concept, or any of these others, it is insufficient to subject the term to Foucauldian genealogy and conceptual historicization, illustrating how its uses and meanings have changed over time in parallel with the epistemic transformations of history.[26] This is due to the *millet* concept's status as not only an historical concept but also a concept of history. It is this concept of history, which became hegemonic in the late Ottoman Empire and which I am calling the *millet* paradigm of difference, that has yet to be properly confronted.

Suryani Difference in an Imperial Age

It may appear a surprising choice to craft a narrative of the transformation of the Ottoman politics of difference at large on the basis of a relatively minor community whose very existence rarely registers in histories of the Ottoman Empire, even those explicitly concerned with "minorities" and "religious" difference. Yet it is precisely

[24]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[25]Ussama Makdisi recounts an illustrative example. When Ottoman foreign minister Şekib Efendi was dispatched to Mount Lebanon in 1845 after an outbreak of intercommunal violence, he articulated a vision of a "new sectarian order" in which individuals would be classified alongside those of the same religion/race/sect/ethnicity ("*hemcins*," "*hemmillet*," "*hemmezheb*"). Makdisi writes, "Because Şekib Efendi conflated *hemcins*, *hemmillet*, and *hemmezheb*, he bolstered the idea that religion and ethnicity were one and the same in Mount Lebanon—unchangeable, irreducible, and therefore inevitably at the heart of any project of reform." While Makdisi is correct to perceive in Şekib Efendi's discourse evidence of his perception of "a primitive sectarian landscape," his conflation of multiple different terms of differentiation including *cins*, *millet*, and *mezheb* attests less to an ideological merging of "religion" and "ethnicity" (as though these had stable, perennial content) than to the formal transformation of difference and its concept. Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*, 85–86. For a study of the changing valences of the term *umma* in relation to the category of "race," see Samah Selim, "Languages of Civilization: Nation, Translation and the Politics of Race in Colonial Egypt," *Translator* 15, 1 (2009): 139–56.

[26]On the insufficiency of genealogy, see Levene, "Sources of History."

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their obscurity—their historical as well as historiographical peripherality—that makes the Suryani ideal candidates for an exploration of the rise of the *millet* paradigm of difference, whose ultimate directive was to make known the obscure, legible the indistinct.[27] This injunction to know the populace stood in stark contrast to the logic of Ottoman administration and classification in earlier eras, when the state relied upon the predetermined categories of Islamic tradition less in order to know the population than to tax it.[28] What I want to claim with respect to this period is not that the category "Suryani" did not exist—the term can be found in Syriac manuscripts copied in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and its earliest attestation is much older still—but rather that neither imperial administrators nor the subjects over whom they ruled saw any need to make the state's classificatory schemes correspond to the "reality" of the differences that existed within the subject population. "Suryani," in such a context, was not a category that demanded "recognition" so much as a term internal to a Suryani world that Ottoman administrators were typically content to ignore.

Generally known to the anglophone world as the Syriac Orthodox Christians, the Suryani—the term for the community in Arabic as well as Turkish—are the followers of the Western Syriac Rite, a Christological and liturgical tradition that dates to the first centuries of Christianity and is distinguished by the use of classical Syriac in worship and literary activity.[29] Adherents of a miaphysite, non-Chalcedonian tradition of Christianity, the Suryani were historically populous in a region known as Upper Mesopotamia, or al-Jazira in Arabic, which extends across what today comprise northwestern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Turkey. They would eventually come to relate to a particular mountainous region surrounding the town of Midyat (in present-day southeast Turkey) known as Tur Abdin—literally, "the mountain of the servants [of God]"—as their communal homeland.

When they were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century, the Suryani were classified in imperial cadastral surveys not as "Suryani" but as *dhimmis*—or, simply, as "Christian"—in accordance with Islamic imperial practice.[30] The Ottoman classificatory system in this period evinced no concern to ascertain the "identities" of its subject population, which Ottoman administration divided instead according to the Islamic distinction between Muslim and *dhimmi* and the imperial distinction between *asker* (the class of military rulers) and *reaya* (the subjects)—divisions pertinent first and foremost to the issue of taxation. To the extent that Ottoman elites and imperial administrators outside of the areas where the Suryani were populous knew anything about the community at all, that knowledge was partial and imprecise. When the famed seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi encountered them in Syria, he explained that "Arabistan's Armenians are called

[27]On the Suryanis' ongoing struggle with communal obscurity and legibility in the present, see Sarah Bakker Kellogg, *Sonic Icons: Relation, Recognition, and Revival in a Syriac World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2025).

[28]Fuat Dundar, "Empire of Taxonomy: Ethnic and Religious Identities in the Ottoman Surveys and Censuses," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, 1 (2015): 136–58.

[29]On the Syriac tradition, see Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Sebastian Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997).

[30]İbrahim Özcoşar, "Osmanlı'da Hristiyan Cemaatlar Arası İlişkiler: Ermeni-Süryani Örneği," *Mukaddime* 5, 2 (2014): 1–14, 9.

'Jacobites'"—conflating the Suryani with the Armenians while using a term, "Jacobite," that has historically been used to theologically situate the Suryani as followers of the sixth-century titular bishop of Edessa Jacob Baradaeus.[31]

That Evliya Çelebi confused the Suryani with the Armenians points to an enduring feature of Suryani communal life in the Ottoman Empire, one that was unremarkable in an earlier Ottoman era but became intensely problematic later on: their unfamiliarity and illegibility relative to the larger communities amongst whom they lived, most notably the Armenians. It is not necessarily that the Suryani were a small community; their population, according to one source, approached 240,000 in the early 1870s, though the reliability of such figures is always difficult to determine.[32] It is rather that only in very few areas, such as Tur Abdin, did they predominate. Both in the major cities of the Eastern Ottoman provinces such as Diyarbakır as well as in the villages of the hinterland, the Suryani were generally outnumbered by the Armenians, a community that was also better integrated into Ottoman imperial governance.[33] The Armenians, like the Orthodox (Rum), were not only more populous than the Suryani but had an important and established presence in Istanbul, the imperial capital, whereas the Suryani were by and large confined to the provinces, rarely ever appearing in Ottoman records except occasionally in Jerusalem, where the Suryani community could be counted by the dozen.

But more so than their lesser demographic weight, the important point to make about Suryani difference in the early modern period is that, within the Ottoman Islamic imperial system of which they were a part, "Suryani" was not a category that the Suryani were particularly invested in (historically speaking, there is a real question as to whether one can properly speak of "the Suryani" in this period at all —but more on that later). It is for this reason that when the Armenian presence obscured the Suryanis' own—indeed when the community was confused *as* Armenian—it was not seen by the Suryani as a problem to be rectified but rather as a tool to make use of when it was advantageous to do so. When European Catholic proselytizing, ongoing within Suryani communities since the early seventeenth century, culminated in a 1782 schism in the church, the Suryani requested that the state place them under the jurisdiction of the Armenian patriarch in Istanbul, this in order to gain access to a direct line of contact to a non-Muslim leader in the imperial capital.[34] By placing themselves under Armenian authority, the Suryani could assert in conflicts with the growing Suryani Catholic community that a given church belonged not simply to them but to the Armenian *millet* of which they were a part.[35]

[31]Ibid., 8. Many contemporary Suryani rejected this designation, clarifying that while Jacob Baradaeus was a Suryani, the Suryani are not "Jacobites."

[32]Khalid Dinno, *The Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis then Revival* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 94.

[33]Emrullah Akgündüz, "Some Notes on the Syriac Christians of Diyarbekir in the Late 19th Century: A Preliminary Investigation of Some Primary Sources," in Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij, eds., *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1915* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 217–40.

[34]Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter "BOA"), KK.D.2542.30.16, 5 Aug. 1782. I thank Masayuki Ueno for calling my attention to this source.

[35]See, for instance, an imperial order from 1842 directing that the churches, monasteries, and other properties that were in the possession of the Suryani "within the Armenian *mezheb*" would remain in their possession without interference from the Catholics (as Catholics would, likewise, retain those in their possession); BOA, C.ADL.100.6009.1. For an instance from 1859 in which the Armenians requested Ottoman permission for the repair of a Suryani church in Urfa, see BOA, İ.HR.168.9052.3, 28 May 1859.

Here, then, was an early reference to that concept, the *millet*, which would come to carry great significance for the Suryani later on as they fought for independent communal recognition from the Ottoman state—a subject we will come to soon. But in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, the Suryani exhibited little concern about their classification as part of the broader Armenian *millet*, and this is very frequently how they were classified. That they were considered part of the Armenian *millet* by Ottoman administrators is evidenced by certain stock phrases that consistently appeared in Ottoman bureaucratic documents that pertained to the Suryani including "*Ermeni milletine tabi Süryani taifesi*" ("the Suryani community which is subject to the Armenian *millet*") and "*Ermeni millet kullarına bağlı Süryani taifesi*" ("the Suryani community, which is tied to the Armenian *millet*").[36] In this era, the Suryani protested neither their subsumption within the Armenian community nor the fact that the Armenians were identified as a "*millet*" whereas the Suryani were relegated to the status of a "*taife*," another common term of social distinction in the early modern period.

That was because, prior to the rise of the *millet* paradigm, the Suryani related to the state not as a distinct community requiring individuated recognition—that is, they did not relate to the state *as Suryani*—but instead as subjects interpellated by an Islamic imperial system with pre-existing categories of difference, most immediately Muslim and *dhimmi*, whose appropriateness to the individuals and communities to which they were applied did not come into question. This administrative system showed no concern with assessing the component parts of the Ottoman population and hence had no need to either attend to the diverse categories of communal belonging that might have existed among Ottoman subjects or establish a single, modular concept of difference through which that populace could be organized. It should be noted in this regard that, prior to the nineteenth century, it was not seen as a problem that terms like *millet* and *taife* were often used interchangeably.[37]

What is more, on the infrequent occasions that the Suryani themselves did use the term *millet*—for instance in manuscript colophons—it was not in order to describe the aggregate of Suryani individuals but rather to nominate Suryani doctrine, tradition, or ecclesiastical hierarchy, as in the expression "the Jacobite *milla*" (*al-milla al-yaʿqubiyya*).[38] Here the term *milla* served not to distinguish "Suryani" as a category of difference or to differentiate the Suryani from their neighbors—Armenian, Kurdish, and otherwise—to the state, but instead mostly likely to demarcate Orthodox church doctrine in the context of intracommunal competition with Catholicism, hence the use of the term Jacobite (*yaʿqubi*) as opposed to Suryani.[39] No such demarcation was

[36]Özcoşar, "Osmanlı'da Hristiyan," 5.

[37]Daniel Goffman, "Ottoman *Millets* in the Early Seventeenth Century," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 11 (Fall 1994): 135–58.

[38]Manuscript 46, Syriac Catholic Church, Archdiocese of Baghdad. Folio 185 verso. https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/128021. See also Ishaq Armalet, *Catalogue Des Manuscrits de Charfet, Publié à l'occasion Du 150e Anniversaire de l'installation Du Siège Patriarcal à Charfet, 1786–1936* (Jounieh: Imprimerie des PP. Missionnaires Libanais, 1937), 202. "Jacobite" here refers to Jacob Baradaeus, the sixth-century titular bishop of Edessa who helped to establish the miaphysite ecclesiastical hierarchy that would develop into the Syriac Orthodox Church. I thank Rosemary Maxton for directing me to these manuscripts.

[39]Rosemary Charlotte Maxton, "Becoming Catholic in Ottoman Mardin (c. 1662–1783)" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2024).

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necessary with respect to the category "Suryani," which was universally adopted by both Orthodox and Catholics without any comment or apparent contest. The term's obscurity to Ottoman administrators, in this era prior to the rise of the *millet* paradigm of difference, was equally unremarkable.

The Rise of the Millet Paradigm

One reason that the *millet* paradigm of difference has proved elusive for historians, perhaps, is that this new system of administration was never explicitly codified or spelled out by the late Ottoman state. There was never any nineteenth-century "*millet* edict," as it were, in the way there was for other administrative innovations such as the institution of a regime of private property (1858), the reorganization of provincial administration (1864), or the creation of an Ottoman parliament (1876). Rather than a formal Ottoman state structure, the *millet* system of communal administration comprised a diffuse logic of imperial rule, one that manifested both in novel practices of state administration as well as in demands that groups of Ottoman subjects felt themselves newly authorized to make on the Ottoman state on the basis of *millet* difference. Never defined by the late Ottoman state, the meaning of the term *millet*—and the logic of social difference that undergirded it—can be located only in the varying contexts of its use, which reveal the novel social and administrative imaginary of which the term was an indicator.

One can trace the origins of the late Ottoman *millet* system to the eighteenth century when, in the face of European Catholic proselytization, the Ottoman state began to accord the Armenian and Orthodox patriarchs resident in Istanbul extensive powers over their adherents in the provinces, their "*millets*" (this was the origin of the Suryanis' administrative subordination to the Armenians in 1782).[40] By placing greater authority in the hands of local ecclesiasts, the Ottomans hoped they might be able to ward off an encroaching Catholic threat that seemed to augur deeper European influence over internal Ottoman affairs. *Millet* recognition, at this point, comprised a set of *ad hoc* prerogatives accorded to particular Christian leaders in Istanbul aimed at bolstering Ottoman efforts to control dissension among subjects in the provinces.[41] It was an expedient solution to concerns over Ottoman sovereignty, indicating the concept's close relation at its point of inception to questions over the nature and ground of imperial rule.

In the nineteenth century, however, the *millet* concept would begin to find much broader application—and would come to signal a more radical transformation in the Ottoman politics of difference. The first group of Ottoman subjects outside of the Orthodox (Rum) and the Armenians to achieve *millet* recognition were the Catholics in 1830—a turning point, according to Bruce Masters, after which it became "understood" that "each religious community within the empire was entitled to its

[40]Masayuki Ueno, "The Rise of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul Reconsidered" (15th Great Lakes Ottomanist Workshop, University of Vermont, 27 Apr. 2019). The authority that the empire had bestowed upon these local Christian ecclesiasts had until this point been relatively limited, covering not the Christians of the empire as a whole but only those in restricted geographical areas, sometimes merely Istanbul and its environs. Inalcik, "Status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch."

[41]Bruce Masters, "The Millet Wars in Aleppo, 1726–1821: An Ottoman Perspective," in Stefan Winter and Mafalda Ade, eds., *Aleppo and Its Hinterland in the Ottoman Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 130–51.

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own *millet*."[42] Ottoman Jews followed closely behind, achieving *millet* recognition in 1835, and soon thereafter, in 1846, the Protestants as well.[43] By the time of the 1907 Ottoman census, Ottoman officials were classifying their imperial subjects as belonging to one of twenty separate categories of *millet* belonging, among them not only Armenian, Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant, but also Vlach, Cossack, Bulgarian, Yezidi, and others still.[44] The inclusion of some of these communal categories was the product of arduous struggles on the part of communities that were marginal either politically or geographically, some of which are well known to scholars, such as that of the Bulgarians, who succeeded in winning Ottoman recognition of an independent Bulgarian church in 1872. Other such struggles, such as that of the Vlachs and their decades-long effort to attain a communal status independent of the Greek Orthodox, have received scant attention, while many others still have not been written about at all.[45]

It was not only that the nineteenth century saw a massive proliferation of communities laying claim to *millet* status, however. It was also that *millet* recognition, which had initially served only to accord non-Muslim leadership jurisdiction over their communities across the empire, came to stand in for a more radical idea: that Ottoman communities of different "religious," "racial," and "linguistic" backgrounds required a sphere of communal freedom and autonomy, under the umbrella of a broader Ottoman imperial sovereignty, in which they could live according to their diverse ways of life. This was a new idea, one that, crucially, was implicated in the Ottoman Empire's contentious relationship with an increasingly imperious Europe.

The European powers of the nineteenth century, eager to find any pretext to intervene in Ottoman affairs, continually accused the Ottoman state of failing to protect the "rights" of Ottoman Christian communities to lively freely and autonomously in accordance with their traditions.[46] The Ottomans were sensitive to such accusations, which could precipitate military intervention—most notably in 1853, when Russia invaded the Ottoman provinces of Walachia and Moldavia under the pretext of protecting Ottoman Orthodox Christians, an act that ignited the Crimean War. But rather than guarantee the full autonomy of non-Muslim communities within Ottoman domains—an unacceptable breach of state sovereignty and the principle of equality, as far as the Ottomans were concerned—the Ottoman state instead promised to safeguard only the "religious" rights of the empire's non-Muslim subjects, guaranteeing them full autonomy within this circumscribed, "non-political" sphere.[47] As Masayuki Ueno has recently argued,

[42]Ibid., 150.

[43]Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, 7.

[44]Cem Behar, "Qui Compte? « Recensements » et Statistiques Démographiques Dans l'Empire Ottoman, Du XVI e Au XX e Siècle," *Histoire & Mesure* 13, 1/2 (1998): 135–45.

[45]Ali Arslan, "The Vlach Issue during the Late Ottoman Period and the Emergence of the Vlach Community (Millet)," *Études Balkaniques* 4 (2004): 121–39.

[46]Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*.

[47]Masayuki Ueno, *Managing Religious Diversity in the Ottoman Empire: Experiences of Istanbul Armenians in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 14; *idem*, "Religious in Form, Political in Content? Privileges of Ottoman Non-Muslims in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59 (2016): 408–41, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341403; Vangelis Kechriotis, "The Modernization of the Empire and the Community 'Privileges': Greek Orthodox Responses to the Young Turk Policies," in Touraj Atabaki, ed., *The State and the Subaltern: Society and*

these "religious privileges" (*imtiyazat-ı mezhebiyye*), as they came to be called, were not intended to protect non-Muslim rights so much as to restrict clerical powers and activities to as small a sphere as possible without provoking either European intervention or non-Muslim dissent. Ottoman state officials, Ueno writes, allowed a sphere of "religious" freedom in order to avoid being seen as "explicitly denying the historical rights of non-Muslims."[48] The Ottomans' sequestration of "religion" from "politics," then, must be seen not as a triumph of secular governance but as an attempt to mitigate a crisis of sovereignty that obtained when the Tanzimat commitment to "equality" was paired with a recognition that the empire was comprised of myriad *millets* whose historical particularities had to be accounted for.

This tension—between the idea of the Ottoman populous as united in a political community transcending religious, ethnic, and linguistic difference (Ottomanism), and the idea that the Ottoman populous was divided along precisely these communal lines (among distinct *millets*) in ways that demanded recognition—manifested in conflicting usages of "*millet*." In as early a text as the Gülhane Edict, issued in 1839 to announce the Ottoman Empire's period of modernizing reform, the term *millet* was used in two distinct ways: first, to refer to the political community of all those subject to the authority of the transcendent Ottoman state, and also, second, to refer to the various communities (*milel*, the plural of *millet*) of which the empire was comprised (including Muslims).[49] These two distinct usages of the term would permeate Ottoman political as well as intellectual discourse throughout the nineteenth century, as Markus Dressler has observed in the writings of the cadre of intellectuals known as the "Young Ottomans."[50] What the Young Ottomans and other intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century suggested was that it was necessary for the Ottoman Empire not only to recognize and respect the differences between the *millets* that comprised the Ottoman polity, but also for the empire to articulate its *own* form of cultural distinctiveness—to formulate an imperial identity that would illustrate its difference from other national or civilizational configurations. This appeared necessary for the empire to sustain a sense of distinctive Ottoman historical or cultural identity while it attempted to modernize—that is, to catch up to what was seen as the technological, military, and political superiority of Europe. The articulation of such historical distinctiveness was crucial both to insist on the empire's own right to freedom and autonomy (in an era of increasing European intervention into internal Ottoman affairs) and to consolidate a broader Ottoman identity that could hold the empire together in an age of nationalist separatism. Hence the nineteenth-century Ottoman search for what Zeynep Çelik has called "cultural self-definition."[51]

The Young Ottomans, among others, saw Islam as an inextricable component of the cultural identity of the broader Ottoman *millet*, and they advocated for the creation of an Ottoman constitutional parliamentary system that incorporated

Politics in Turkey and Iran (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 53–70; Fujinama Nobuyoshi, "Privileged but Equal: The Privilege Question in the Context of Ottoman Constitutionalism," in Dimitri Stamatopoulos, ed., *Balkan Nationalism(s) and the Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 2015), 33–59.

[48]Ueno, *Managing Religious Diversity*, 14.

[49]Dressler, "Tracing," 363.

[50]Ibid., 368–78.

[51]Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 15.

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Islam into its governing structure.[52] Yet the nineteenth-century prominence of the idea that the empire bore some fundamental Islamic identity should not lead us to the conclusion that the empire remained an Islamic one in the way it had been before, when the terms and practices of Islamic tradition such as "*dhimmi*" and "*ahl al-kitab*" had guided imperial administration. For if Islam retained a close relation to Ottoman state governance in the nineteenth century, the nature of this relation had changed in a fundamental respect. No longer a system of divine authority manifest in the figure of the sultan, who served as "God's shadow on earth," Islam in the nineteenth century was increasingly figured as important because of its constitutive relation to the *historical* identity of the broader Ottoman *millet*—even as it was recognized that, from another perspective, Muslims comprised but one *millet* of many existing within the borders of the broader Ottoman Empire. If many intellectuals and imperial administrators argued that Islam was more constitutive of the identity of the Ottoman *millet* than any other religion or cultural heritage—and if they hence privileged Ottoman Muslims over the empire's other communities—the logic of this privileging was no longer internal to the terms of Islamic tradition. Rather, it followed from a new constellation of presuppositions regarding population and demography, culture and history, that charted a relation between *millet* difference and the right to live in accordance with a certain way of life. This new logic did not preclude non-Muslim Ottoman *millets* from asserting their own right to communal autonomy within the framework of continued Ottoman sovereignty (in fact, non-Muslim leaders pointed to the continued involvement of Islam in imperial governance as attesting to the necessity of a sphere of communal administration beyond the purview of the state).[53] It did, though, raise the possibility that non-Muslim communities might be cast as foreign to the Ottoman (or later, Turkish) nation entirely—that while they may have had a right to claim autonomy and self-determination, they had no right to do so here, on this Ottoman/Turkish land.

What the foregoing illustrates is not merely that the *millet* concept was a modern technology of rule thoroughly imbricated in the project of nineteenth-century Ottoman reform—a tool for recognizing communal difference in order to mitigate it. It is also that the rise of the *millet* paradigm of difference in the late Ottoman Empire represented something more than a new grid of intelligibility through which to organize the empire's diversity of communal formations. The *millet* concept was not reducible to "religion," "nation," or any other such category of communal differentiation, a fact evidenced by the interpellation of so many different *kinds* of collectives through the *millet* paradigm over the course of the nineteenth century including Protestants, Yezidis, Cossacks, Bulgarians, and Jews. The rise of the *millet* paradigm of difference testified instead to precisely the recognition that the categories of difference through which the Ottoman population was to be organized and apprehended were open, indeterminate. Like the very Ottoman historical self that the empire sought to uncover in this period, the *millet* differences that comprised the Ottoman population were understood to exist

[52]On the continued imbrication of Islam in reformed Ottoman rule, see Karpat, *Politicization of Islam*; Benjamin Fortna, "Islamic Morality in Late-Ottoman 'Secular' Schools," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, 3 (2000): 369–93; Frederick F. Anscombe, "Islam and the Age of Ottoman Reform," *Past and Present* 208 (Aug. 2010): 159–89.

[53]Nobuyoshi, "Privileged but Equal," 37.

somewhere "out there," waiting to be discovered, in a realm that Ottoman subjects were beginning to learn how to access.[54]

Becoming a Millet

It was around the year 1870 that the Suryani began to realize that, should they fail to find grounding within this new realm of communal differentiation—should they fail to establish themselves as a *millet* in the eyes of Ottoman state officials—their distinctiveness would not receive institutional recognition, and their difference would risk being subsumed under some other category of *millet* belonging. This was a failure that could carry great material consequence.

The potential consequences were made manifestly clear to the Suryani when the Armenians, the much larger and more imperially connected *millet* to whom the Suryani lived in close proximity across much of the empire, began to assert to the Ottoman state that the Suryani were not a distinct community but part of the Armenian *millet*; that they were "Armenian." The Armenian leadership in Istanbul, who for decades already at this point had been negotiating the transformed politics of difference of the Tanzimat period, were well familiar with the new *millet* paradigm of difference and how it had redefined Ottoman administration.[55] By claiming that the Suryani—who as we saw earlier had already been subordinated to, though not exactly subsumed within, the Armenian *millet* in the late eighteenth century—were "Armenian," the Armenians hoped to inflate their *millet*'s official population numbers, which would accord them greater influence in Ottoman imperial affairs and perhaps greater representation in government.[56] Yet what was perhaps more immediately alarming to the Suryani was that the Armenians also saw the subsumption of the Suryani within their *millet* as an opportunity to seize monasteries and churches that had traditionally been used and managed by the Suryani, but that the Armenians might now claim as their "communal" (*millet*) property.[57] Such ecclesiastical properties were not merely places of prayer and worship but stores of great communal wealth.

It was in response to this crisis of Armenian appropriations and Suryani non-recognition that the newly appointed Suryani Patriarch Peter IV made immediately for Istanbul and then for London, two centers of imperial power where the ecclesiast planned to sound the alarm on Armenian transgressions and attempt to secure independent *millet* recognition. In Istanbul Peter could have the ear of the Ottoman Sultan and high-ranking bureaucrats, and in London he hoped to win an audience with the Queen, whose support for the Suryani Peter knew would be a boon to Suryani efforts at communal independence in the Ottoman Empire as well as in India (where there existed a large Suryani population).[58] European powers like Britain had become major actors in Ottoman domestic affairs over the course of the nineteenth century, primarily by asserting that they were the protectors of Ottoman Christians,

[54]Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[55]Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith*; Ueno, "Religious in Form."

[56]Ottoman officials explicitly noted this as an Armenian aim: BOA Y.EE.38.71.1.1., 11 Mar. 1893.

[57]On the rise of the idea of "communal property," an important addendum to the better-known story of the rise of "private property" in the late Ottoman Empire, see Ozil, *Orthodox Christians.*

[58]On the patriarch's visit to England, see William Taylor, *Antioch and Canterbury: The Syrian Orthodox Church and the Church of England 1874–1928* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2005).

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whose "oppression" under Ottoman Muslim rule they pointed to as a pretext to intervene ever more intrusively in Ottoman internal affairs.[59] The Suryani patriarch was well aware of this dynamic, having encountered French influence in his own community's conflict with the Catholics. The leader of a smaller sect without an imperial sponsor, the patriarch hoped to secure British imperial support comparable to that already enjoyed by other Ottoman Christian communities including the Catholics, the Protestants, and the Orthodox.

While in London attempting to secure this support, the patriarch also wrote a letter to the Ottoman ambassador in the city in order to protest the Armenians' recent provocations.[60] But beyond simply decrying the injustice of Armenian church seizures and arrogations of ecclesiastical control—and rather than citing contraventions of imperial orders issued by prior Ottoman sultans and earlier Muslim sovereigns, as Christian communities had often done in earlier eras[61]—the patriarch instead took the letter as an opportunity to insist on the Suryanis' historical distinctiveness, on their collective social difference from the Armenians. He used the letter to demonstrate that the Suryani differed in religion, language, and culture from the Armenians, asserting that the Suryani therefore required the same freedom and autonomy that other such social collectivities had been accorded as independent communities possessing distinctive ways of life. The patriarch's task, as he saw it, was to convince the Ottomans that the Suryani constituted a *millet* requiring independent recognition.

"Perhaps [the Armenian patriarch] is unaware of the standing of our church," he began his letter to the Ottoman official, addressing an Armenian suggestion that the Suryani were not only part of the Armenian *millet* but were in fact Armenians. "Our sect (*ta'ifa*) is not Armenian but rather originally and independently Suryani.… Even in Islamic scripture it is written that the Suryani *milla*[62] is ancient and fully independent. Our language is not their language; our prayers are not their prayers; our clergy is distinct from theirs. This is clear to everyone." Asserting that they, too, had to be accorded respect for their privileges (*imtiyaz*)—invoking, perhaps, the system of "religious privileges" that the Ottomans had institutionalized earlier in the century—the patriarch suggested that the Suryani required their own protected communal sphere as well. For they, like every other *millet* in the Ottoman Empire, were compelled to live in accordance with their own cultural codes and religious commitments. He concluded, "You are aware that every sect (*ta'ifa*) has a system of belief (*i'tiqad*) and a religion (*madhhab*) to which it is committed. Every sect believes that it encounters God through its beliefs, and everyone born into a religion would willingly sacrifice his life for it. One does not question one's religion, for one's mother's milk is sweeter than all else."[63]

The assemblage of terms of which the patriarch made use in insisting upon the Suryanis' essential commensurability with other Ottoman communities—sect (*ta'ifa*), belief (*i'tiqad*), religion (*madhhab*), *milla*—should not distract us from the central point of this remarkable letter: that the Suryani constituted a community that was

[59]Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 31–65; Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*.

[60]BOA HR.İD.1597.53.1, 25 Oct. 1874.

[61]Oded Peri, *Christianity under Islam in Jerusalem: The Question of the Holy Sites in Early Ottoman Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

[62]This is the Arabic original of the Turkish term *millet*.

[63]BOA HR.İD.1597.53.1, 25 Oct. 1874.

defined by forms of linguistic, religious, and ethnic difference, and that it would be culturally injurious as well as *historically incorrect* for the Ottoman state to classify them as members of a *millet* that was not, in reality, their own.

It was necessary for the patriarch to make this point because the question of *millet*ness now infused diverse aspects of Ottoman imperial rule, including those that pertained to the Suryani-Armenian dispute. The central issues over which the Suryani and the Armenians clashed were each tied in various ways to the new *millet* system of difference: communal property (whether certain monasteries or churches, for instance, historically belonged to the Suryani or to the Armenians); population numbers (whether individuals were to be counted as Suryani or Armenian); governmental representation (how many representatives each community would receive on recently established administrative bodies); and taxation (which community had the right to collect taxes in different areas). The relationship between these areas of nineteenth-century Ottoman administration and *millet* difference has been documented by some historians, and the Suryani-Armenian conflict testifies to the importance Ottoman subjects accorded to *millet* recognition when negotiating these areas of governance.[64] Documents from the patriarchal archive clearly indicate that for a community to win a place for their own representative on a provincial administrative council (*meclis-i idare*), for instance—positions that were crucial to securing communal influence in Ottoman governance—that community had to achieve recognition from provincial administrators of their *millet* status as well as of their demographic weight in any given district.[65] Other documents illustrate the importance that the Suryani attributed to *millet* recognition in securing their right to collect taxes from the Suryani population (the Tanzimat reforms had authorized *millet* leaders to collect taxes from *millet* members, some of which were to go to the state and some of which were to be put toward communal affairs).[66] Others illustrate the Suryanis' concern to ensure they were counted as Suryani rather than as Armenian in imperial censuses, which Suryani leaders saw as essential to bolstering communal influence.[67] It was due to the import of *millet* recognition in areas such as these that the Suryani of the nineteenth century were so concerned to ensure that the Ottoman state was aware of their distinctiveness as an independent *millet* and of the demographic weight of their community across the empire.

[64]Roderic H. Davison recognized long ago that *millet* difference was accounted for in the development of what he called the "principle of representation" in late Ottoman governance; "The Advent of the Principle of Representation in the Government of the Ottoman Empire," in *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774–1923: The Impact of the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 96–111.

[65]The Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Archive of Dayr al-Zaʿfaran, or Dayro d-Kurkmo (hereafter "K," following the referencing scheme of Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute, which digitally houses the archive) 05-319; 18 Oct. 1884; K05-321/322, 19 Apr. 1892/3; K05-524, 30 June 1887; K05-529/530, 3 Aug. 1879; K05-578/579, 22 Dec. 1893; K05-582, 17 Dec. 1888; K05-606, 29 May 1888; K05-663, 11 Jan. 1889; K05-704/705, 6 Sept. 1885; K05-767, 11 Jan. 1888; K10-B86-4/5, 12 June 1893; K10-B86-16/17, 1 Jan. 1889.

[66]See articles 90 to 93 of the Armenian constitution (*nizamname*), ratified in 1863 by Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz as part of the reorganization of the structure of the Armenian as well as Orthodox and Jewish *millets*. *Düstur*, edition 1, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi, 1863): 959–60, https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedhamid2.437039616/?sp=971&st=image&r=-0.257,0.005,1.696,0.772,0. On Suryani tax collection and *millet* identity, see Church of the Forty Martyrs archive, Mardin, Turkey 24/40-155, 13 Apr. 1896; and B86-77, 13 June 1873.

[67]K05-264, dated 1884; K10-B86-60, 21 Jan. 1884.

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Yet, though the leaders of the Suryani struggle for *millet* recognition succeeded in many instances in convincing imperial administrators of the historical reality of Suryani communal difference, they confronted a recurring problem that would prove to be a source of great anxiety and perpetual instability over the course of their struggle for *millet* recognition, a problem related to the category "Suryani" itself. Because at the same time that the Suryani patriarch, church, and communal notables worked to establish that the Suryani of the Ottoman Empire possessed a certain distinctiveness following from their language, religious tradition, and history—from their *historically* unique way of life—they simultaneously had to ensure that, when it came time to assess and identify the components of the Ottoman population, this particular way of life was correctly nominated by the category "Suryani." This was no small undertaking, because within the transformed nineteenth-century Ottoman regime of social difference, which was predicated upon the idea that all individuals belonged to one or another *millet*, Ottoman subjects were regularly called upon by the state to identify themselves and the *millet* to which they belonged—to declare to census takers, population registry officials, tax collectors, and so forth whether they were Suryani, Armenian, Orthodox, Jewish, Yezidi, or something else entirely. The *millet* system of reformed Ottoman governance relied upon such acts of self-identification. If the legal recognition of the Suryani as an independent *millet* depended upon Suryani leaders like Patriarch Peter IV proclaiming to the Ottoman state that theirs was a distinct collectivity with a certain way of life requiring freedom, autonomy, and representation in government, it depended equally as much upon the hundreds of thousands of Suryani that lived throughout the Ottoman Empire declaring that they too were Suryani—that this category captured and represented their particular form of being, that they belonged to this historically conditioned communal formation and had to be identified as such.

Naming and the Real

It is for this reason that the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Archive of Mardin, a repository of thousands of letters and petitions of patriarchal correspondence from the late Ottoman period, reveals so strident an effort on the part of the church leadership not merely to call the Ottoman administration's attention to the existence of a Suryani community within the empire and to render that community more legible, but further, to ensure that the Suryani community actually identified themselves as "Suryani" to Ottoman officials at the right moments and in the correct venues.[68] This archive—the contents of which date predominantly to the 1880s and 1890s, the period when the project for Suryani *millet* recognition was at its height—is the material result of this very struggle.

Prior to this project of communal reform, Suryani life had been largely dispersed and decentralized, with many Suryani communities living with little or no contact with the central Suryani Church in Mardin. In one village to the northeast of Diyarbakır, the villagers had been without a Suryani priest for a hundred years before the patriarch dispatched one to cater to their spiritual needs and ensure that

[68]See, for instance, K05-691, 16 Mar. 1893; K05-331/332, n.d.; K05-333/334, 1 Apr. 1893; K05-724, 3 Mar. 1888; K05-637/638, n.d.; K05-408, 19 July 1888; Church of the Forty Martyrs archive 24/40-131, 15 Apr. 1896.

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they counted themselves as members of the Suryani *millet*.[69] In this encounter and many others, the most fundamental challenge facing the effort to inculcate a unified Suryani *millet* centered upon persuading a disparate and mercurial Suryani population to identify with the category "Suryani" itself. While the many communities and individuals that emerged in the documents produced by these encounters may have been recognizably Suryani to those involved in the project of communal reform and *millet* recognition—as well as, I hasten to add, to present-day historians who take the Suryani as historical subject—the idea that it was incumbent upon these communities and individuals to identify themselves *as* Suryani, to affiliate themselves and their way of life with this particular communal designation, was a new one. It was not guaranteed that the Suryani who encountered the *millet* regime of Ottoman administration would necessarily identify themselves as Suryani; a cognizance of the importance of correctly naming oneself had to be instilled within them.

And when they refused to embrace the designation Suryani, as they often did, this refusal—alongside the hysterical reactions it precipitated on the part of the Suryani communal elite—illustrated what was a profound tension at the heart of the *millet* paradigm of difference. It is not that the category of the *millet* was somehow incommensurate with the nature of Ottoman collectivities like the Suryani who were defined by myriad traditions, ways of being, and forms of life that could not be captured by this term, in the way that the category "religion," for instance, has been shown by critical studies of secularism to have imposed a provincially Protestant European understanding upon diverse non-European peoples.[70] The *millet* concept, as I have argued, represented less a particular category with substantive content and identifiable features than a categorical openness, less an answer than a question, less a requirement for Ottoman subjects to identify themselves by the terms of any predetermined scheme than an injunction to simply say who they were, to declare what *name* they went by.

But this apparently simple dictate often misfired, and when it did, it revealed a new kind of Ottoman subject: those who refused the name that accurately described their being. What was so destabilizing about such refusals was not so much the merely irksome problem of Ottoman subjects "falsely" identifying with another *millet* or avoiding *millet* identification entirely for mundane reasons such as avoiding taxation. The reason these instances of false identification produced so deep an anxiety in the *millet* leaders and state administrators who encountered them, I contend, was that they threatened to expose the cracks within the fundamental principle upon which the idea of *millet* difference depended: that Ottoman subjects were who they were; that they were coincident with and "identical to themselves"[71]; that in the absence of any transcendental authority guaranteeing the proper organization of Ottoman society, the forms of belonging and collectivity already existent within Ottoman population could, at the very least, be relied upon.

[69]K05-331/332, n.d.; K05-333/334, 1 Apr. 1893.

[70]Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[71]Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 171.

Among the many Ottoman subjects who had committed to this principle was a Suryani notable by the name of Hanna Safar—a man of considerable wealth and influence with both the Suryani patriarch (who reportedly attended Safar's wedding) and the Ottoman government (with whom his father had allied during an Ottoman campaign in the 1860s to reassert state authority over Tur Abdin).[72] A *muhtar*, or headman, in the district of Midyat who represented the Suryani before the Ottoman government, Safar also served as a liaison between the Suryani *millet* and the patriarch, with whom the notable kept up frequent correspondence. In 1888, several years into the church's project of communal reorganization and *millet* recognition, Safar sent a letter to the patriarch to address a pressing matter (see figure 1).[73] He explained that the Suryani of Midyat and its surrounding villages had taken to identifying themselves to the Ottoman state as Armenians, Catholics, and Protestants, despite what Safar saw as the obvious fact that these individuals were truly Suryani. The notable did not specify where exactly these acts of false identification were taking place, but it is not difficult to speculate in this regard. As part of its nineteenth-century reform program, the Ottoman state had established numerous offices and practices directed toward the creation of a modern system of population registration. Beyond conducting regular and increasingly sophisticated censuses beginning in the 1830s, the state had introduced identity cards (*tezkere-i osmaniye*) in the 1860s (which became necessary for all official imperial business including, for instance, the purchase and sale of property), created new offices for the registration of populations, appointed officials to these new positions across much of the empire, and instituted a system of continuous population registry (*defter*) that provincial administrative authorities maintained and updated.[74] When registering with the state in these new institutions, Ottoman subjects were called upon to identify the *millet* or *mezheb* of which they were a part, and procedures for changing one's *millet* or *mezheb* membership were also put into place.[75]

It is difficult to say with certainty why the Suryani that Hanna Safar referred to might have begun to identify not with the Suryani *millet* but with the Armenian or Catholic *millets* instead, though the reason may have been principally financial. While taxation under reformed Ottoman governance was meant to take place at the level of the individual—this in accordance with the Tanzimat reforms' aim of instituting equality between all Ottoman subjects—in practice the *millet* leaderships were often involved in collecting state taxes from their community members on behalf of the Ottoman government (and were also authorized to collect special *millet* taxes to be put toward communal expenses).[76] By identifying with a certain *millet*, an individual or group of individuals might be able to reduce their tax burden—if, for instance, that community's leadership had negotiated a tax reduction or exemption

[72]Michael Sims, "'Without a Purpose, Misfortune Will Befall Our Land': Discourses of Nation in Late Ottoman Kurdistan" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2023), 232–75.

[73]K05-607/608, 12 Jan. 1888.

[74]Kemal H. Karpat, "Ottoman Population Records and the Census of 1881/82–1893," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9, 3 (1978): 237–74.

[75]*Düstur*, edition 1, vol. 7. (Ankara 1941): 435. The procedures put into place for changing one's *millet* or *mezheb* appear to have been codified only with the revision of the law of population registration in 1900, although documents from the patriarchal archive clearly indicate that such procedures were already in place on the ground before then.

[76]See, for instance, the clause in the Armenian *nizamname* authorizing the *millet* council to collect communal taxes from community members. *Düstur*, edition 1, vol. 2, 959–60,

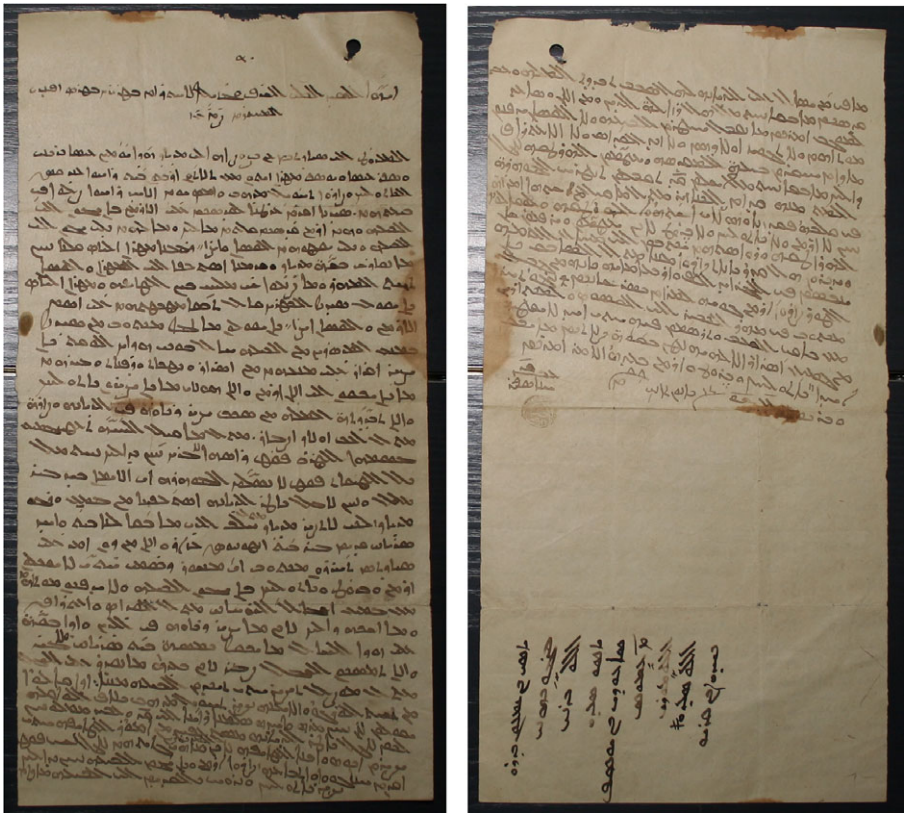

Figure 1. Hanna Safar's letter to the patriarch, 12 January 1888. The Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Archive of Dayr al-Zaʿfaran (*Dayro d-Kurkmo*), Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute, 05-607/608. Image courtesy of Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute.

with the local administration—or perhaps even avoid state taxes altogether if the *millet* with which they had identified themselves to Ottoman officials, say, was unaware of their *millet* membership and hence never came around to collect. To declare that one had "become" Armenian, Catholic, or otherwise, in other words, may have been simply an act of bureaucratic manipulation directed toward financial ends.

These sorts of bureaucratic "conversions," then, might not have attested to any real change in an individual's identity, beliefs, or religious practices—and it was precisely this discrepancy between the "reality" of who the Suryani were and the (to Safar's mind) falsehood of their self-identification to the government that so disturbed the notable. Safar explained to the patriarch that many of the Suryani who had supposedly "converted" (*tahwil madhhab*) to Catholicism, Armenianism, or Protestantism had not actually embraced these other communities/faiths but in fact continued to attend Suryani churches, receive baptisms, take communion, and sanctify their engagements and marriages with Suryani priests. They continued to fully participate, that is, in Suryani communal life, merely refusing to identify themselves to the Ottoman state with the category that Safar saw as correctly nominating this way of life: "Suryani." By identifying themselves as part of another

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millet to the government, Safar explained, these individuals were simply manipulating the new system of *millet*-based taxation to their own personal benefit. Their conversions, he held, were "contrary to reality" (*khilaf al-waqiʿa*[77]). "Religion" (*al-diyana*) had become like a "game for small children," with Suryani priests allowing anyone and everyone to enter the church, participate in the liturgy, and receive spiritual services, irrespective of how they publicly identified themselves to Ottoman state authorities. This represented a contemptible "religious laxity" (*rikhawa fi-l-din*) and a dangerous state of affairs. The reason that Safar found this practice of Suryani misidentification so disturbing was that he understood, to a degree that the masses of Suryani did not, what was at stake. He understood that, if the Suryani did not maintain a material, documentary record of their communal existence within the domain of the Ottoman state—if they did not ensure that they identified themselves publicly as members of the Suryani *millet*—then the community (*al-milla*) would risk "dissipating entirely" (*tatabaddad al-milla*).

It is important to understand what exactly Safar meant by this. The immediate danger to which Safar referred—the reason that the Suryani *millet* was at risk of "dissipating entirely"—was not that the Suryani were converting to other faiths, abandoning their Suryani identity, or otherwise leaving the community in some way that marked them as no longer Suryani or outside the communal fold. The people about whom Safar was concerned remained unambiguously Suryani, as they themselves, Safar suggested, would have acknowledged. The danger was rather to the category "Suryani" as the material guarantor of *millet* difference. It was to the capacity of the signifier "Suryani" to successfully coincide with the referent, the Suryani themselves, a coincidence required in order to secure the forms of autonomy and freedom necessary to preserve the Suryani way of life within post-Tanzimat Ottoman society.

For Safar, it was therefore beside the point if the Suryani who falsely identified themselves as Armenians, Catholics, Protestants, and so on, affirmed in private, to the patriarch, or among themselves that in truth they were "neither Armenians, nor Catholics, nor Protestants," as they apparently sometimes did. If those same Suryani continued to identify as members of these other communities to the state, then the leaders of those communities could write to Istanbul and report, as Safar suggested, that "this many houses have joined us," adding to their own population numbers while eating away at the Suryanis' own. Safar cited as an example that it had recently been printed in the papers that 1,400 houses in Tur Abdin—the heart of the Suryani Ottoman population—had "become" Armenian. If the current situation were to continue, Safar warned, not more than five Suryani houses would remain, and the vast Suryani community of Tur Abdin would go the way of Aleppo, or Mosul, where over the previous century a mass defection to Catholicism had not only dwindled the Suryani population but had allowed the Catholic *millet* to usurp Suryani churches as well.[78] Safar recommended that the way to avert a similar such disaster in Tur Abdin would be to force the Suryani to bring their public form of self-identification into accordance with the "reality" of the manner in which they actually lived—to force

[77]The Arabic term *waqiʿa* generally connotes not "reality" so much as "occurrence" or "happening," but orthographically it is very close to the word for reality (*waqiʿ*). In this context, Safar clearly has something like "reality" in mind.

[78]İbrahim Özcoşar, "Separation and Conflict: Syriac Jacobites and Syriac Catholics in Mardin in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 38, 2 (2014): 201–17.

them to adopt the name "Suryani." To do so, the patriarch should issue a general order to the priests, *muhtar*s, and all other Suryani forbidding anyone from giving or receiving the Holy Sacraments unless they renounced their identification with other *millets* and publicly avowed their Suryani identity. Were the patriarch to issue such an order, Safar affirmed, "not a single Suryani would remain Catholic, Protestant, or Armenian"—and the Suryani *millet*, perhaps, would be secured.

An Archival Hiccup

My wager is that we would be wrong to interpret Hanna Safar's request that the patriarch require the Suryani to self-identify as Suryani as simply the request of a self-interested communal notable who stood to profit from retaining his authority over the population of Tur Abdin—an authority which would have been attenuated by the population's identification as anything other than Suryani. It is true that the Safar family had been engaged in a project to establish what one historian has described as "near-feudal hegemony over Midyat" and its environs since at least the early 1880s, and that their concern that the Suryani be classified as Suryani was inseparable from their concern to consolidate their political and economic control over the region.[79] But Hanna Safar's incredulity at the Suryani villagers' refusal to recognize the *reality* of their Suryani identity—his righteous anger in the face of their apparent deception—suggests that there is something more in his letter than this strictly functional explanation would allow.

Five years after Safar had submitted his request to the patriarch, a second letter found its way into the ecclesiast's diwan, this one signed by three men—notables, one assumes, given their seals—who were also from Tur Abdin.[80] As had Safar, they used their letter to inveigh against a group of households that, under the leadership of a renegade communal leader whom they identified as Hanna Jawwo, continued to go by the name "Armenian"—this even though their self-identification as Armenian harmed the community's standing in local government. More to the point, as far as the petitioners were concerned, their self-identification as Armenian was simply untrue. There is reason to believe that the three petitioners were concerned with the same population in Tur Abdin that had prompted Hanna Safar to write to the patriarch five years earlier.[81] The patriarch had apparently intervened in the communal dispute in the meantime, and the petitioners thanked him for his efforts. But a faction asserting Armenian identity remained, and so the petitioners asked that the patriarch obtain a governmental order (*emirname*) prohibiting these houses from identifying themselves as Armenian to state officials. What came next in the petition is what I wish to describe as an archival "hiccup"—an intrusion into the archival record of an anxiety that attended the rise of the *millet* paradigm and the commitment to the reality of communal difference on which it depended.

Petitions to the patriarch were often dictated to a scribe and written—or rather, recorded—in Arabic, even though the Suryani of Tur Abdin tended to speak either Turoyo, a vernacular Syriac, or Kurdish. But Arabic was the lingua franca of Mardin,

[79]Sims, "Without a Purpose," 240.

[80]K05-691, 16 Mar. 1893.

[81]Hanna Safar's letter to the patriarch mentions the same renegade communal leader, Hanna Jawwo. K05-607/608, 12 Jan. 1888.

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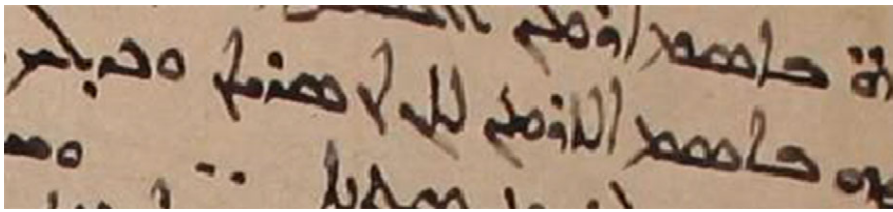

Figure 2. The archival "hiccup," 16 March 1893. The Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Archive of Dayr al-Zaʿfaran (*Dayro d-Kurkmo*), Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute, 05-691. Image courtesy of Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute.

home to the patriarchate, and it may have been the language that the patriarch himself was most comfortable in. The Arabic of such petitions was often highly colloquial and irregular, reflecting not only the orality of the process of dictation but also the fact that Arabic, for petitioners, was often a third or even fourth language.

The petition reads, "We request that you obtain a governmental order prohibiting their use of the name 'Armenian' in official documents (*mazbata*), because…," and it is here that the interesting intrusion occurs (see figure 2). There is a repeated word in the document, a repetition that can only be interpreted as extraneous, a mistake—a hiccup. In Arabic, the petition reads "*li'anna anna Suryan*"—the conjunction "*anna*" occurring twice—which I propose to render in English as "because they … they're Suryani!", or perhaps "because they … well, they're Suryani!" What I want to suggest is that the speaker dictating the petition paused after the first "*anna*"—the scribe lifts his pen—and repeated it again, struggling to find the words to explain what was so obvious as to not require any explanation at all: that just as A equals A, so too must Suryani be designated Suryani: *li'anna … anna Suryan!*[82] Yet what this repetition registered was the surprising fact that this utterly obvious reality nevertheless had to be enunciated, and when it was, the speaker was confronted with the possibility of something that he knew to be strictly impossible: that these Suryani villagers who were in every respect Suryani were, in fact, *not.* He faced the possibility, that is, not that the villagers might actually be Armenian, Catholic, Protestant, or otherwise—it was not the authenticity of the villagers that was at issue—but instead that before him was a group of subjects who defied the truth of their own historically conditioned difference, who defied the very truth of history.

For it was this truth, at bottom, upon which the entire edifice of the late Ottoman *millet* paradigm of difference depended: the truth that the Ottoman population could be known, classified, and represented without reference to any higher authority or order, on the basis of nothing but history—*on its own terms.* To the extent that the *millet* concept was imposed upon Ottoman society, then, it must be considered an imposition of a unique kind, distinct from related processes wherein diverse already-existing collectives, traditions, and life-worlds were subjected to the logics, structures, and concepts of modernity: minority, religion, nation, the division between public and private, and so forth.[83] The *millet* paradigm of difference cannot be conceived as

[82]Another plausible reading would be "*liʾanna … inna Suryan!*" with "*inna*" marking a transition to the first-person plural: "Because they … we're Suryani!"

[83]On the construction of the category of "minority" in the modern Middle East, see Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Laura Robson, ed., *Minorities and the Modern Arab World:*

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a new "grid of intelligibility" thrust upon diverse Ottoman collectives insofar as the *millet* was the principle that Ottoman society constituted a grid that was *already* intelligible—that the Ottoman population contained within it and from the outset the terms through which it could be identified, known, and accounted for.[84] It is for this reason, perhaps, that the rise of the *millet* paradigm of difference precipitated anxieties, in certain cases, around not so much the *millet* concept but the event of identification, the very act of naming—because at issue was less the appropriateness of the category *millet* to the heterogeneous Ottoman population than it was the problem of how to guarantee the truth of the forms of historical belonging and collectivity that the *millet* paradigm claimed to be merely bringing to light.

In that respect, to reckon with the rise of the concept of the *millet* in the late Ottoman Empire would mean not merely an historiographical accounting within this particular field but also a methodological accounting within the practice of history itself. For is the central postulate of the *millet* paradigm of difference—that Ottoman society, indeed the whole of the terrestrial earth, could be apprehended without stipulating anything in advance, without reference to any higher order, on its own terms—not the guiding principle of the discipline of history? Do we not also stumble—hiccup—when gripped by that momentary anxiety that the truth of this practice of knowledge production is, finally, without ground or guarantee?

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New Perspectives (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016); and Mahmood, *Religious Difference*. For an excellent study of how Alevism was produced as a sign of the history of the Turkish "nation," see Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[84]On grids of intelligibility, see Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 25; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*: Volume I (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 93.

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