

The “Millet” Paradigm: On Difference in the Late Ottoman Empire

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 the meaning of “nation,” though in the nineteenth century this specific connotation had not yet cohered, and its meaning remained considerably more ambiguous. As a placeholder—and only as a placeholder—one might wish to think of it as denoting a variety of the kind of difference conveyed by sociological categories of comparison such as “religion,” “ethnicity,” “nation,” “culture,” and the like. 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 authoritativeness of 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 paranoid 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.<sup>1</sup> In place of such hierarchical distinctions, the state committed to the principle of equality between subjects, increasingly understood as something more like “citizens.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Just as the effort to inculcate a novel collective sense of Ottomanism was getting underway, Ottoman administrators and subjects began to sense that the empire remained divided, no longer between Muslims and *dhimmis* but between “*millets*.” These *millets*, as diverse Ottoman actors came to understand them, were defined by differences of religion, ethnicity, language, history, culture, 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 Greek Orthodox but also the Yezidis—all of these, communities whose differences did not fall along what historians

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<sup>1</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: 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 *The Ottoman World*, ed. Christine Woodhead (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 165–69; Benjamin Braude, “Introduction,” in *Christians & Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Abridged Edition*, ed. Benjamin Braude (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner, 2014), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> 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 Press, 2014); Alp Eren Topal, “Ottomanism in History and Historiography: Fortunes of a Concept,” in *Narrating Empires: The Promotion and Perception of Habsburg and Ottoman Multinationalism 1848–1918*, ed. Johanna Chovanec and Olof Heilo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 77–98.

today might recognize 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 on the one hand and European imperial intervention on behalf of “beleaguered” Christian minorities on the other.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> If few required convincing that *millet* difference was real and had to be accounted for—indeed *all* Ottoman subjects were understood as

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<sup>4</sup> 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, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> 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, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 37.

being 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.

Rather than representing the substitution of one understanding of social difference for another—viz., “nation” for “religion”—what I wish to suggest is 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,” “sect” nor “race,” *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 their 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 grounds, 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, a community whose population was concentrated far from the imperial center in the northern part of ancient Mesopotamia at the intersection of what would become, in time, 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 grounds 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 principle of reality itself.

#### *Sectarianism, Religion, and the Histor(icit)y of Difference*

It is not so much that the *millet* concept has gone unnoticed by historians of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, who have indeed 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 of the politics of difference in the Ottoman Empire.”<sup>6</sup> 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, I wish to suggest, is not only the historical question of what exactly this shift was and how it generated so thoroughly transformed practices and understandings of community,

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<sup>6</sup> Richard E. Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2020), 17.

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 Ottoman historiography, concerning the historian's approach to modern concepts of difference.

But before opening up this larger question, it will be necessary to address the various confusions that have troubled studies of the concept of the *millet* to date. Until the 1980s, historians had 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*.<sup>7</sup> 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 Greek Orthodox, the Armenians, and the Jews in particular but recognizing the communal autonomies of non-Muslims more generally as well. In historiography, the idea of a *millet* system of non-Muslim administration converged nicely with a related idea that also long pervaded the literature, namely: the idea 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").<sup>8</sup>

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

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<sup>7</sup> 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 part II (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 211–12.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Gibb and Bowen, who describe the "general organization of Ottoman society" as "essentially 'corporate.'" Gibb and Bowen, 1:211.

classical era had no grounding in historical reality.<sup>9</sup> 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—and it was not until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he argued, that the term began to see wider application to non-Muslim communities across the empire. It was only in the context of the transformations in non-Muslim relations with the state over the course of the nineteenth century, that is, that the term *millet* began to take on any degree of institutional concreteness.

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 it has in the transformation of which the nineteenth-century spread of *millet* discourse was, in fact, the indicator.<sup>10</sup> 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 itself, when Braude argued 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

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Braude, “Foundation Myths of the Millet System,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (London, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 69–90.

<sup>10</sup> 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 *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture, and History*, ed. Amila Buturovic and Irvin Cemil Schick (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007); Najwa Al-Qattan, “Dhimmi in the Muslim Court: Legal Autonomy and Religious Discrimination,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999): 429–44; Ayşe Ozil, *Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Empire: A Study of Communal Relations in Anatolia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Paraskevas Konortas, “From Ta’ife to Millet: Ottoman Terms Concerning the Ottoman Greek Orthodox Community,” in *Ottoman Greeks in the Age of Nationalism: Politics, Economy, and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dimitri Gondicas and Charles Issawi (Princeton, N.J.: 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 *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Avigdor Levy (Princeton, N.J.: The 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.

phenomenon, one that arose in the crucible of late Ottoman reform and amid growing western political hegemony.<sup>11</sup> 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-nationalisation” 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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 an 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 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.”<sup>13</sup> Often these forms of historical accounting are pursued with the aim of

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<sup>11</sup> Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*; 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, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 16–32.

<sup>12</sup> Dressler, “Tracing the Nationalisation of *Millet*,” 363; Sigalas, “A Genealogy of the Late Ottoman *Millet*,” 352.

<sup>13</sup> 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, N.Y.: 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, U.K., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture*



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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> So too was it at the root of what Ussama Makdisi has argued, in 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

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*of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties*, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Yosmaoğlu, 155.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms (Makdisi specifies this logic not so much as that of nation and ethnicity as of sectarianism, which he argues is equally the logic of coexistence).<sup>17</sup>

What I would like to observe 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, of the historicity of history itself as a conceptual regime and a mode of governance in late Ottoman society. It may be true 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 carried out to expose the contingency of such modernist categories—a project that Dipesh Chakrabarty once called “provincializing Europe”<sup>18</sup>—remains important and unfinished. Yet what also requires our attention, I wish to argue, 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, I wish to suggest, 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 is after inheres not in the content of the *millet* concept so much as in the form the *millet* concept took over the course of the

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<sup>17</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 60. Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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 *taʿifa* (which might be translated, not without peril, as, respectively, “nation,” “religion,” “race,” “race,” “religion,” and “sect”).<sup>19</sup> To understand the *millet* concept, or indeed 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.<sup>20</sup> This is due to the *millet* concept’s status not just as an historical concept but also as 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 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

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<sup>19</sup> 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 content) than to the formal transformation of difference and its concept. Makdisi, *The 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,” *The Translator* 15, no. 1 (2009): 139–56.

<sup>20</sup> On the insufficiency of genealogy, see Nancy Levene, “Sources of History: Myth and Image,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 79–101.

ultimate directive was to make known the obscure, legible the indistinct.<sup>21</sup> 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, alongside the imperial distinction between ruler and ruled, less in order to know the population than to tax it.<sup>22</sup> 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—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*—this is 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.<sup>23</sup> Anathematized and expelled by the Byzantine Empire after the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Suryani eventually found themselves 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. The Suryani would become particularly populous in a mountainous region surrounding the town of Midyat (in present-day southeast Turkey) known as Tur Abdin, literally, “the mountain of the servants of God.”

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<sup>21</sup> 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).

<sup>22</sup> Fuat Dundar, “Empire of Taxonomy: Ethnic and Religious Identities in the Ottoman Surveys and Censuses,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 1 (2015): 136–58.

<sup>23</sup> My understanding of Syriac tradition is heavily indebted to the work of Sarah Bakker Kellogg. See Kellogg. *Sonic Icons*.

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 *dhimmi*—or, simply, as “Christian”—this in accordance with Islamic imperial practice.<sup>24</sup> 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 ‘Jacobites’”—conflating the Suryani with the Armenians while using a term, “Jacobite,” that has historically been used to theologially situate the Suryani as followers of the sixth-century Bishop of Edessa Jacob Baradaeus.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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

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<sup>24</sup> İbrahim Özcoşar, “Osmanlı’da Hristiyan Cemaatlar Arası İlişkiler: Ermeni-Süryani Örneği,” *Mukaddime* 5, no. 2 (2014): 9.

<sup>25</sup> Özcoşar, 8. Many contemporary Suryani reject this designation, clarifying that while Jacob Baradaeus was a Suryani, the Suryani are not “Jacobites.”

<sup>26</sup> Khalid Dinno, *The Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis Then Revival* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2017), 94.

imperial governance.<sup>27</sup> The Armenians, like the Greek 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 (indeed historically speaking, there is a real question as to whether one can properly speak of “the Suryani” in this period at all). 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 that they have access to a direct line of contact to a non-Muslim leader in the imperial capital.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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

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<sup>27</sup> Emrullah Akgündüz, “Some Notes on the Syriac Christians of Diyarbekir in the Late 19th Century: A Preliminary Investigation of Some Primary Sources,” in *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1915*, ed. Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 217–40.

<sup>28</sup> Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter “BOA”) KK.D.2542.30.16. Dated 5 August 1782. I thank Masayuki Ueno for calling my attention to this source.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, an imperial order from 1842 ordering that the churches, monasteries, and other properties that were in the possession of the Syriac Christians “within the Armenian *mezheb*” shall remain in their possession without interference from the Catholics (as well as vice versa for those that were in the possession of the Catholics). C.ADL.100.6009.1. For an instance from 1859 in which the Armenians requested Ottoman permission for the repair of a Syriac church in Urfa, see İ.HR.168.9052.3 dated 28 May 1859.

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 very frequently they were classified as such. 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*”).<sup>30</sup> 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 exhibited no concern with assessing the component parts of the Ottoman population and hence had no need either to attend to the diverse categories of communal belonging that might have existed among Ottoman subjects or to 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.<sup>31</sup>

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

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<sup>30</sup> Özcoşar, “Osmanlı’da Hristiyan Cemaatlar Arası İlişkiler: Ermeni-Süryani Örneği,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Goffman, “Ottoman Millets in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 11 (Fall 1994): 135–58.

ecclesiastical hierarchy, as in the expression “the Jacobite *milla*” (*al-milla al-ya`qubiyya*).<sup>32</sup> 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 (*ya`qubi*) as opposed to Suryani.<sup>33</sup> No such demarcation was necessary with respect to the category “Suryani” itself, 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

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<sup>32</sup> MS 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, 1937), 202. “Jacobite” here refers to Jacob Baradaeus, the sixth-century 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.

<sup>33</sup> Rosemary Charlotte Maxton, “Becoming Catholic in Ottoman Mardin (c. 1662-1783),” PhD diss., (University of Oxford, 2024).



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 Greek Orthodox patriarchs resident in Istanbul extensive powers over their co-religionists in the provinces, their “*millets*” (this was the origin of the Suryanis’ administrative subordination to the Armenians in 1782).<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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 grounds 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 Greek Orthodox 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 own *millet*.”<sup>36</sup> Ottoman Jews followed closely behind, achieving *millet* recognition in 1835, and soon thereafter, in 1846, the Protestants as well.<sup>37</sup> By the time of the 1907 Ottoman census, Ottoman officials were classifying their imperial subjects as belonging to one of twenty separate categories of

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<sup>34</sup> Masayuki Ueno, “The Rise of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul Reconsidered” (15th Great Lakes Ottomanist Workshop, University of Vermont, April 27, 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, “The Status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch under the Ottomans.”

<sup>35</sup> Bruce Masters, “The Millet Wars in Aleppo, 1726-1821: An Ottoman Perspective,” in *Aleppo and Its Hinterland in the Ottoman Period*, ed. Stefan Winter and Mafalda Ade (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 130–51.

<sup>36</sup> Masters, 150.

<sup>37</sup> Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, 7.

*millet* belonging, among them not only Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant, but also Vlach, Cossack, Bulgarian, Yezidi, and others still.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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, linguistic, and cultural 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 was increasingly discernible across nineteenth-century Ottoman society, but it was most clearly evident in the rise of what came to be known as “religious privileges” (*imtiyazat-ı mezhebiyye*), a nineteenth-century institution that has not received nearly enough attention from historians.<sup>40</sup> The edict announcing the recognition of these privileges, which can be thought of as comprising a set of communal “rights,” suggested

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<sup>38</sup> Cem Behar, “Qui Compte? « Recensements » et Statistiques Démographiques Dans l’Empire Ottoman, Du XVI e Au XX e Siècle,” *Histoire & Mesure* 13, no. 1/2 (1998): 135–45.

<sup>39</sup> Ali Arslan, “The Vlach Issue during the Late Ottoman Period and the Emergence of the Vlach Community (Millet),” *Études Balkaniques* 4 (2004): 121–39.

<sup>40</sup> There are several important exceptions, most notably Masayuki Ueno, whose work on this issue has charted a new course for the study of non-Muslims in the late Ottoman Empire. See Masayuki Ueno, “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; Vangelis Kechriotis, “The Modernization of the Empire and the Community ‘Privileges’: Greek Orthodox Responses to the Young Turk Policies,” in *The State and the Subaltern: Society and Politics in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 53–70; Fujinama Nobuyoshi, “Privileged but Equal: The Privilege Question in the Context of Ottoman Constitutionalism,” in *Balkan Nationalism(s) and the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Dimitri Stamatopoulos (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 2015), 33–59.

that it was merely reaffirming an old Ottoman imperial practice of respecting the religious freedoms and autonomies of their non-Muslim subjects—this in a way akin to the “myths” of the *millet* system. But in matter of fact the edict inaugurated a practice of state rule that was decidedly new. For one, by specifying that the “privileges” applied only to the sphere of the “religious” (*mezhebi*, or sometimes *ruhani*), the edict instantiated a distinction between the spheres of the “political” and the “religious” that had not existed in Ottoman governance until this point. Yet the edict constituted a further innovation in Ottoman imperial administration as well, in that it placed the five non-Muslim communities to which it was addressed—in addition to others who soon requested that the edict be directed toward them as well—on equal ground, removing the various administrative hierarchies that had structured intercommunal relations in the empire for centuries.<sup>41</sup> In place of a stratified system of Islamic imperial rule, the practice of recognizing the “religious privileges” of the Ottoman Empire’s diverse communities inaugurated a new kind of state administration, one predicated on a principle of equality—that all Ottoman subjects were essentially equal and deserving of equal rights—uneasily paired with a recognition that the differences between various communities under Ottoman rule (themselves now considered as equal to one another) 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 (divided among distinct *millets*) in ways that demanded recognition—manifested in conflicting usages of the term “*millet*” itself. 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).<sup>42</sup> These two distinct usages of the term would permeate Ottoman political as

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<sup>41</sup> Ueno, “Religious in Form, Political in Content?,” 418.

<sup>42</sup> Markus Dressler, “Tracing the Nationalisation of *Millet*,” 363.

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.”<sup>43</sup> 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 *millet*s 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 maintain 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 cultural distinctiveness was crucial both to insist on the empire’s own right to freedom and autonomy (this in an era of increasing European intervention into internal Ottoman affairs) as well as 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.”<sup>44</sup>

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 Islam into its governing structure.<sup>45</sup> 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

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<sup>43</sup> Dressler, 368–78.

<sup>44</sup> Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1992), 15.

<sup>45</sup> On the continued imbrication of Islam in reformed Ottoman rule, see: Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*; Benjamin Fortna, “Islamic Morality in Late-Ottoman ‘Secular’ Schools,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 3 (2000): 369–93; Frederick F. Anscombe, “Islam and the Age of Ottoman Reform,” *Past and Present*, no. 208 (August 2010): 159–89.

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).<sup>46</sup> It did, however, 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 a right to 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 merely a new grid of intelligibility through which to organize the empire’s diversity of communal formations. The *millet* concept was reducible neither to “religion,” nor “nation,” nor 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,

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<sup>46</sup> Nobuyoshi, “Privileged but Equal,” 37.

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 somewhere “out there,” waiting to be discovered, in a realm that Ottoman subjects were beginning to learn how to access.<sup>47</sup>

### *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 were in fact part of the Armenian *millet*, were themselves “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, was well familiar with the new *millet* paradigm of difference and how it had redefined Ottoman administration.<sup>48</sup> 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

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<sup>47</sup> 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).

<sup>48</sup> Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*; Ueno, “Religious in Form, Political in Content?”

influence in Ottoman imperial affairs and perhaps greater representation in government.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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 community as well).<sup>51</sup> 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, whose “oppression” under Ottoman Muslim rule they pointed to as a pretext to intervene ever more intrusively in Ottoman internal affairs.<sup>52</sup> 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 Greek Orthodox.

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<sup>49</sup> Ottoman officials explicitly noted this as an Armenian aim: BOA Y.EE.38.71.1.1. Dated 11 March 1893.

<sup>50</sup> On the rise of the idea of “communal property”—an important addendum to the more well known story of the rise of “private property” in the late Ottoman Empire—see Ozil, *Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>51</sup> 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, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 31–65; Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire*.

While in London attempting to secure this support, the patriarch also made contact with the Ottoman ambassador in the city in order to protest the Armenians' recent provocations.<sup>53</sup> But more than simply decry the injustice of Armenian church seizures and arrogations of ecclesiastical control—and rather than cite contraventions of imperial orders issued by prior Ottoman sultans and earlier Muslim sovereigns, as was often done by Christian communities in earlier eras<sup>54</sup>—the patriarch instead took the letter as an opportunity to insist on the Suryanis' 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, addressing an Armenian suggestion that the Suryani were not only part of the Armenian *millet* but were in fact themselves Armenian. “Our sect (*ta`ifa*) is not Armenian but rather originally and independently Suryani... Even in Islamic scripture it is written that the Suryani *milla*<sup>55</sup> 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 religious privileges (*imtiyaz*), thereby invoking the system of religious autonomy that the Ottomans had inaugurated in 1853, 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

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<sup>53</sup> BOA HR.İD.1597.53.1. Dated 25 October 1874.

<sup>54</sup> Oded Peri, *Christianity Under Islam in Jerusalem: The Question of the Holy Sites in Early Ottoman Times* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> This is the Arabic original of the Turkish term *millet*.



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."<sup>56</sup>

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 defined by forms of linguistic, religious, even proto-racial 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 fact, their own.

It was necessary for the patriarch to make this point because the question of *milletness* now infused diverse aspects of Ottoman imperial rule, including those that pertained to the Suryani-Armenian dispute. Indeed the central issues over which the Suryani and the Armenians clashed—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)—were each tied in various ways to the new *millet* system of difference. 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.<sup>57</sup> 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

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<sup>56</sup> BOA HR.İD.1597.53.1. Dated 25 October 1874.

<sup>57</sup> Roderic 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. Roderic H. Davison, "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, T.X.: University of Texas Press, 1990), 96–111.

demographic weight in any given district.<sup>58</sup> 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).<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.

Yet if 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 nevertheless 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. For 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

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<sup>58</sup> The Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Archive of Dayr al-Za‘faran, or Dayro d-Kurkmo (hereafter “K”) 05-319. Dated 18 October 1884; K05-321/322. Dated 19 April 1892/3; K05-524. Dated 30 June 1887; K05-529/530. Dated 3 August 1879; K05-578/579. Dated 22 December 1893; K05-582. Dated 17 December 1888. K05-606. Dated 29 May 1888. K05-663. Dated 11 January 1889. K05-704/705. Dated 6 September 1885; K05-767. Dated 11 January 1888; K10-B86-4/5. Dated 12 June 1893; K10-B86-16/17. Dated 1 January 1889.

<sup>59</sup> 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 – Tertip 1, cuz-i 2* (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi, 1863): 959-960. <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: 40M-24/40-155, dated 13 April 1896. Church of the Forty Martyrs archive, in Mardin, Turkey (hereafter “40M”) B86-77, dated 13 June 1873.

<sup>60</sup> K05-264. Dated 1884; K10-B86-60. Dated 21 January 1884.

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, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Yezidi, or something else entirely. The *millet* system of reformed Ottoman governance relied upon such acts of self-declaration. 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.<sup>61</sup> The archive itself—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

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<sup>61</sup> See, for instance: K05-691. Dated 16 March 1893; K05-331/332. Undated; K05-333/334. Dated 1 April 1893; K05-724. Dated 3 March 1888; K05-637/638. Undated; K05-408. Dated 19 July 1888; 40M-24/40-131. Dated 15 April 1896.

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 a priest to cater to their spiritual needs and ensure that they counted themselves as members of the Suryani *millet*.<sup>62</sup> 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 (*Suryānī/Sūryani*). For 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 indeed they often did, this refusal—alongside the hysterical reactions it precipitated on the part of the Suryani communal elite—illustrated what I want to suggest 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.<sup>63</sup> 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

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<sup>62</sup> K05-331/332. Undated. K05-333/334. Dated 1 April 1893.

<sup>63</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2019); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 2013).

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, I wish to suggest, 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 who encountered them, I contend, was that they threatened to expose 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”<sup>64</sup>; 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.

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).<sup>65</sup> 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 maintained 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.<sup>66</sup> 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, this despite what Safar saw as the obvious fact that these individuals were, in

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<sup>64</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015), 171.

<sup>65</sup> 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.

<sup>66</sup> K05-607/608. Dated 12 January 1888.

fact, 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

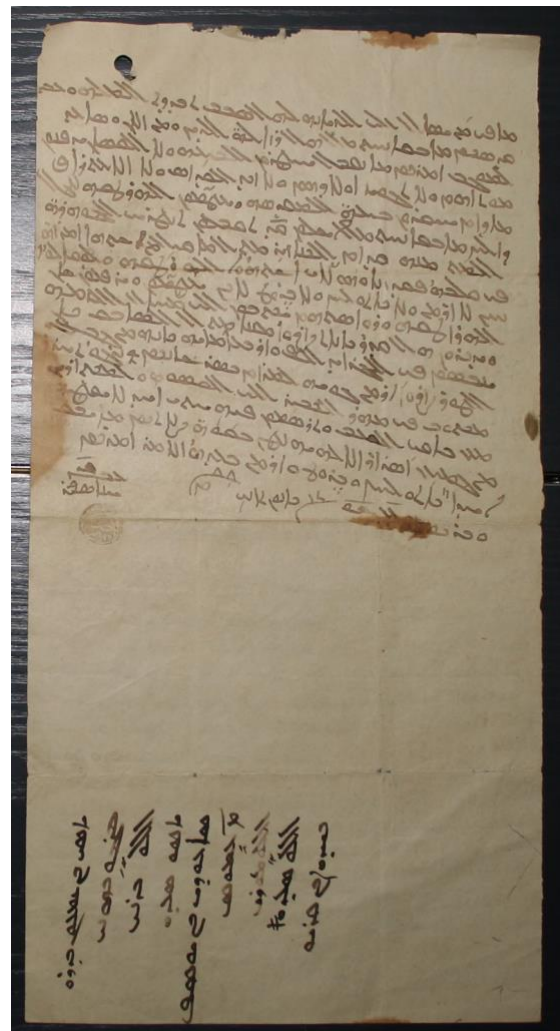
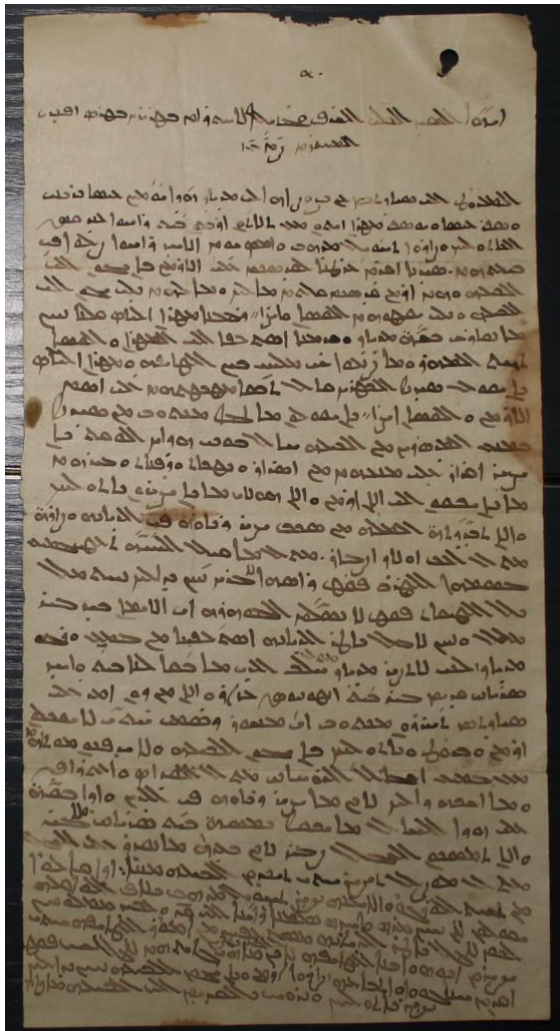


Figure 1: Hanna Safar’s letter to the patriarch in 1888, held in the former Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate at the Saffron Monastery (*Deyrulzafaran*), Mardin, Turkey.

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*) which was maintained and updated by provincial administrative authorities.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

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).<sup>69</sup> 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 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 not in fact aware 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.

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<sup>67</sup> Kemal H. Karpat, “Ottoman Population Records and the Census of 1881/82-1893,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9, no. 3 (1978): 237–74.

<sup>68</sup> *Düstur – Tertib* 1, c.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 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.

<sup>69</sup> See, for instance, the clause in the Armenian *nizamname* authorizing the *millet* council to collect communal taxes from community members. *Düstur – Tertip* 1, cuz-i 2 (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi, 1863): 959-960.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedhamid2.437039616/?sp=971&st=image&r=-0.257,0.005,1.696,0.772,0>.

These sorts of bureaucratic “conversions,” then, might not have attested to any real change in one’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 *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-waqi‘a*<sup>70</sup>). “Religion” (*al-diyana*) had become like a “game for small children,” with Suryani priests allowing any 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 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 itself (*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,

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<sup>70</sup> The Arabic term *waqi‘a* generally connotes not “reality” so much as “occurrence” or “happening,” but orthographically it is very close to the word for reality (*waqi‘*). In this context, Safar clearly has something like “reality” in mind.



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” itself as the 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 amongst themselves, that they were in fact “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.<sup>71</sup> The way to avert a similar such disaster in Tur Abdin, Safar suggested, would be to force the Suryani to bring their public form of self-identification into accord with the “reality” of the manner in which they actually lived—to force them to adopt the name “Suryani.” To do so, he suggested that the patriarch issue a general order to the priests, *muhtars*, 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

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<sup>71</sup> Özcoşar, “Separation and Conflict.”

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 maintaining 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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> As had Safar, these three men 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 despite the fact that 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

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<sup>72</sup> Sims, “Discourses of Nation in Late Ottoman Kurdistan,” 240.

<sup>73</sup> K05-691. Dated 16 March 1893.

that had prompted Hanna Safar to write to the patriarch five years earlier.<sup>74</sup> 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, home to the patriarchate, and the patriarch himself may have been most comfortable in Arabic. 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. 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!* 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

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<sup>74</sup> Hanna Safar’s letter to the patriarch mentions the same renegade communal leader, Hanna Jawwo. K05-607/608. Dated 12 January 1888.

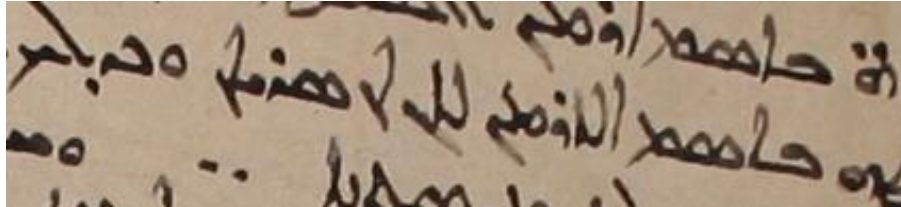


Figure 2: The archival “hiccup”

something that he knew to be strictly impossible: that these Suryani villagers who were in every respect Suryani were, in fact, *not*. He was confronted with the possibility, that is, not that the villagers might actually be Armenian, Catholic, Protestant, or otherwise—the authenticity of the villagers was not 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 truth of history itself.

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 itself—*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.<sup>75</sup> The *millet* paradigm of difference cannot be conceived as a new “grid of intelligibility” thrust upon diverse Ottoman collectives insofar as the *millet* paradigm 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

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<sup>75</sup> 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: New Perspectives* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2016); Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*. 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, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2014).

identified, known, and accounted for.<sup>76</sup> It is for this reason, perhaps, that the rise of the *millet* paradigm of difference precipitated anxieties, in certain cases, not so much around the *millet* concept itself but around the event of identification, the act of naming itself—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 refusing to identify as “Suryani,” then, those whom Hanna Safar decried as deceitful opportunists should perhaps be understood as having done more than merely manipulate the *millet* paradigm of difference toward their own financial or social benefit. Perhaps their choice not to identify themselves with the category “Suryani”—their decision not to align themselves with the rigid communal signifier that the Suryani leadership and the Ottoman state had deemed applicable to them<sup>77</sup>—should be understood as a more active kind of refusal: a refusal to countenance a logic of history and difference that was liable to alter the forms of life that it claimed merely to correctly nominate.

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<sup>76</sup> On grids of intelligibility, see Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, 25; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 93.

<sup>77</sup> On signification and rigidity, see Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2001).