

# THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN MINORITIES IN EFFORTS BY THE GREAT POWERS TO DISMEMBER THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE \*

Dr. SALÂHI R. SONYEL

When the Turks made the fateful decision of embracing Islam as their religion, they became a marked people in the eyes of the Christian World, which saw that religion as a great danger to its very existence. The Turks failure, or refusal, to accept Christianity, despite the efforts of Pope Pius II,<sup>1</sup> did not endear them to the Christians of the West; nor did their contribution to the Muslim cause during the great politico-religious upheaval of the Crusades.

These religious wars created bitterness, hatred and hostility between Islam and Christianity, which were to last for centuries. Christendom saw Islam as a deviance, a bogey, which, it believed, aimed at eradicating the Christian heritage; and therefore the Ottoman Turks, who had espoused the cause of Islam by taking over the Caliphate, became the object of that Christian hatred and hostility.

The ecclesiastical and lay leaders of the Christian West never forgave the Turks for turning down Christianity, for joining forces with, to them, an alien and resurgent religion, and for delivering the final blow to the ailing and decaying Christian Orthodox Byzantine Empire by capturing Constantinople, the jewel of the Christian East. The Anglican Bishop William Barry, in contrast to his predecessors, was rather mild in the unfounded epithets he directed against the Turks in expressing this Christian hatred, when he declared in August 1919:

“The damning guilt of Turkish rule is that it never has been, never could be, anything else than Barbarism, laying waste civilization and lying prone on its ruins... We are bound to admit with

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Valyi: *Revolutions in Islam*, London 1925, pp. 27-8.

Gladstone that... he (the Turk) appears in history as 'the great anti-Christ among the races of men' ".<sup>2</sup>

As the Ottoman Empire expanded into Eastern Europe, many more Christians came under the rule of the Sultan. Not only was the Christian World shrinking because of the advance of Islam, but Western foreign trade was suffering because the lucrative resources and the markets of the East were now in the hands of a Muslim World Power.

When the Turks appeared before the walls of Vienna, poised to pierce the very heart of a disunited Christian Europe, the shock aroused the Christian states to put aside, for the time being, their un-Christian, petty and selfish interests, to join forces and to initiate a new Crusade<sup>3</sup>- the process of de-Islamisation of Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, of Anatolia and possibly of the whole Middle East.

That process of de-Islamisation, which some Muslim scholars believe is still going on in our own time- and look at the state of the Middle East was to be one of the main causes, if not the only cause, of the great tragedy that befell the people of Anatolia, both Muslim and non-Muslim. And yet, the Turks were frequently welcomed by the Christian populations of the territories they conquered, as confirmed by Western scholars such as Woodhouse, Dakin, Maier, Lewis, Shaw, and many others.<sup>4</sup>

Since the foundation of the Ottoman State, particularly during its ascendance, the ethnic and religious communities living within its boundaries, irrespective of their origin, culture and beliefs, benefited enormously from Ottoman lenience, and from all the other benefits provided by a strong and benevolent state. They enjoyed relative security of life, liberty and estate, social, educational, linguistic autonomy and economic prosperity, and preserved their ethnic and religious identity in peace and order within the Ottoman communal (*millet*) system.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> William Barry: "The Turks, Cardinal Newman, and the Council of Ten", *Nineteenth Century and After*, no. DX, August 1919, p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Stoneman: "The origins of European Philhellenism", *History Today*, v. 34, December 1984, pp. 21 and 27.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Charles Eliot: *Turkey in Europe*, London 1908, p. 43; Matheos of Edessa (Urfa) *Chronicles*, no. 129; *The Armenian Issue in Nine Questions and Answers*, Foreign Policy Institute publication, Ankara 1982, p. 6; C. M. Woodhouse: *Modern Greece: a short history*, London 1977, p. 93; Douglas Dakin: *The Unification of Greece. 1770-1923*, London 1972, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on the *millet*, system see Paul Wittek: *The rise of the Ottoman Empire*, London 1938, pp. 28 ff.; H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen: *Islamic Society and the West*, v. i., part 2, London 1957, pp. 207-61; Kemal Karpat: *Turkey's Politics*, Princeton 1959, p. 4.

This is increasingly confirmed by impartial and authoritative historiographers who admit that, fundamentally, the Ottoman Empire was not a despotic theocracy, which oppressed and exploited its non-Muslim subjects. On the contrary, it allowed a large degree of local, communal and regional autonomy, and measured against contemporary Europe, it practised exemplary tolerance towards the numerous ethnic and religious groups living within its boundaries.<sup>6</sup> This is also confirmed by a number of British diplomatic and consular representatives who served in the various provinces of the Ottoman Empire, especially after the introduction, on 18th February 1856, by Sultan Abdulmecit, of an Imperial Charter (*Hatt-ı Humayun*), confirming the religious and legal equality of all his subjects.

By the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (Kouchouk Kainardja) of 1774, and a number of conventions and armed interventions, the Christians of the Turkish Empire were placed under the protection of the Tsar. The Treaty of Paris of 1856, however, stipulated that, henceforth, the Christian subjects of the Sultan would be under the collective protection of the Great Powers and not under the exclusive protection of one Power alone.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the British diplomatic and consular agents in Turkey took the liberty of considering themselves entitled to watch over the interests of the Ottoman Christians, and to advise their government and the Turkish authorities about their treatment.

It is revealed in many of their illuminating reports that the general condition of the Christian *millet*s improved by leaps and bounds, particularly since the 1830s. Benefiting from the exemption granted to them from military service, in return for the payment of a trifling military exemption tax (*bedel-i askeriye*), these Christian *millet*s were enriching themselves at the expense of the Muslims who, if not killed in action for the defence of the

<sup>6</sup> See for example Eliot, op. cit.; Arnold J. Toynbee: *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*, London 1923; Felix Valyi, op. cit.; E. Alexander Powell: *The struggle for power in Moslem Asia*, New York 1925; Sir Telford Waugh: *Turkey, yesterday, today and tomorrow*, London 1930; H.A. Lybyer in Eleanor Bisbee: *The New Turks*, Philadelphia 1951, p. x; Geoffrey Lewis: *Turkey*, London 1965; Bernard Lewis: *The emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford 1966; F. G. Maier: *Cyprus from earliest times to the present day*, London 1968; Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw: *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, v. ii, Cambridge University 1977.

<sup>7</sup> Turkey No. 17 (1877): Instructions addressed to Her Majesty's Embassy at Constantinople respecting financial and administrative reforms and the protection of Christians in Turkey, 1856-75, London 1877, Part II, Nos. 78 and 80.



Empire, returned home to find the local conditions changed, and their land, now uncultivated and infertile, usurped by the Christian money-lenders.<sup>8</sup> Being religious and inarticulate, the Muslims preferred to suffer in silence rather than bring their grievances to the notice of the authorities in the Ottoman capital; whereas the Christians had, at Istanbul, and throughout the Empire, many redress-demanding representatives in the form of consulates, agencies and embassies. Indeed, not only were their complaints listened to when made, but even fabricated for them when not made, as reported by British Consul Palgrave in 1866.<sup>9</sup>

If, from time to time, some of the Christians did suffer from maladministration, especially when the Ottoman Empire began to decline in the latter part of its existence, and when expansionist and colonial Powers began to plot for its downfall with the connivance of some of its minorities, in most cases they suffered because their leaders were given much autonomy in running the affairs of their community without much interference from the state; but they abused their power. Hence, the Christians suffered sometimes, not so much from Ottoman maladministration, as from the misrule of their own leaders. Nevertheless, as a result of the *millet* system, the Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of the Sultan lived in relative peace and security, until nationalism and revolutionary ideas began to make inroads in the Ottoman fabric early in the 19th century.<sup>10</sup>

This is in sharp contrast to the status and fate of ethnic and religious minorities living in contemporary Europe, such as the Jews, the Irish Catholics, the Protestants of France and Silesia, the Calvinists of Hungary and others, all of whom were persecuted for their religious beliefs and many of whom could only find solace by taking refuge in the Ottoman Empire where Muslim, Christian and Hebrew lived side by side in harmony, as testified by a number of Western scholars. According to Alexander Powell, there was less religious bigotry and persecution throughout Ottoman history than there was in the history of the European states between the 13th and 16th centuries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Turkey No. 16 (1877): Reports by Her Majesty's diplomatic and consular agents in Turkey respecting the condition of the Christian subjects of the Porte, 1868-85, London 1877, No. 1/1.

<sup>9</sup> Bilal N. Şimşir: *British Documents on Ottoman Armenians*, Ankara 1982, Doc. No. 23/1, p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> See Bernard Lewis: "Impact of the French Revolution on Turkey", *Journal of World History*, July 1953.

<sup>11</sup> Powell, op. cit., p. 120; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 267; Waugh, op. cit., p. 114; D. S. Margoliouth: *Early development of Mohammedanism*, London 1913; Sir T. W. Arnold: *The preaching of Islam*, London 1913.

It was when the Ottoman Empire began to decline at the end of the 17th century that some of the Christian minorities, which aspired for autonomy or independence, started to intrigue with the Great Powers, particularly with Christian Orthodox Russia, who saw in such minorities valuable allies and instruments in her military ambitions directed against Ottoman territories. In order to fulfil her dream of self-aggrandisement towards the warm waters of the Mediterranean, Russia sought to undermine Ottoman strength from within by stirring up the religious feelings and national aspirations of the Sultan's Christian subjects, in particular of those with whom she shared a common Christian religious heritage.

Meanwhile, the influx into the Ottoman Empire of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, during the 19th century, did more harm than good. These missionaries, began to indoctrinate the Ottoman Christians by not only teaching them their own history, language and literature, but also by inculcating in them liberal and revolutionary ideas. The Protestant missionaries were clandestinely trying to convert the Muslims as well as the other sects; the Catholics were trying to lure the Orthodox Christians to the Vatican; and the Orthodox were forcing their congregation to remain in their own church. In order to protect themselves and their protégés, these missionaries, who posed as the champions of the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, began to appeal to the Great Powers for their intervention, and thus caused many diplomatic incidents.<sup>12</sup>

The Western Christian World learned from them about the situation in Turkey, and saw that country through their eyes. They stigmatised the Turks and introduced them to the world as "murderers of Christians". Their widespread and effective propaganda succeeded in whipping up the Turcophobia of the West, and perpetuated the old image of "the sanguinary and savage Turk", who was all out to destroy the Christian heritage.

The Catholics in Turkey were protected mainly by France, Italy and Austria, the Protestants by Britain, Germany and the U.S.A., and the Orthodox by Russia. The Christian minorities were thus divided by the Great Powers for their own ulterior motives. Russia was using the Orthodox and Gregorian Christians in order to possess Istanbul, the Straits and the Eastern Provinces of Turkey; Britain was using the Protestants to preserve and increase her influence and interests in the Middle East: in Egypt, Arabia and Mesopotamia (Iraq); and France was making use of the Catholics and

<sup>12</sup> For the missionary movement in Turkey, see Edwin B. Bliss: *Turkey and the Armenian atrocities*, Philadelphia 1896.



the Gregorians for her own interests in Cilicia (Çukurova), the Lebanon and Syria.

All these Great Powers, more consciously than not, were directly or indirectly causing restlessness, and encouraging agitation, even insurrection, among the different Christian creeds. This would enable them to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire by pretending that they were interested in the problems of the Christian minorities; but, in fact, they were jockeying with one another for influence in, or a portion of, that Empire when the "sick man of Europe" demised. In order to hasten his demise, they encouraged the growing nationalist movements in that Empire, particularly in the Balkans.

In Thrace the Greeks, in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Bulgaria the Serbs and the Slavs, and later in Anatolia the Greeks and the Armenians began to demand autonomy, or independence, with the covert and overt assistance of the Great Powers who vied with one another in order to dominate the Middle East. Their frequent interventions in the domestic affairs of the Ottoman Empire contributed greatly to the forces of instability in that Empire, and to the inception and intensification of insurrection and terrorism from the repercussions of which we are still suffering today.

Some of the ecclesiastical and lay leaders of the Ottoman Christian communities, taking advantage of the extensive rights and privileges granted to them within the Ottoman State, which almost amounted to an *imperium in imperio*, began to intrigue with foreign Powers. Having been deceived with promises of autonomy or independence, these leaders were manipulated by those Powers and forces that strove to partition and eliminate the Ottoman Empire, which would increase their own influence and authority.<sup>13</sup> They used every occasion that weakened the strength of the Ottoman State to create disturbances and incidents, particularly when the country was at war, hoping to capitalise on this, and very often they offered their services to the enemies of their country.

In the light of recent archival material, and many publications, it has become more evident that, some of these Christian minorities played an important role in efforts to dismember the Ottoman Empire. Their aims and ambitions, if fully realised, would involve the dissolution and disappearance of the Empire, to be replaced by puppet Christian states subservient to their patrons the Great Powers, although nowhere in the Anatolian provinces did they constitute more than 15 per cent of the total population.

<sup>13</sup> Kamuran Gurun: *Ermeni Dosyası*, Ankara 1983, pp. 37-40.

Nevertheless, some of the various Christian creeds in the Ottoman Empire realised, at an early stage of their relationship, which began after the 1880s and blossomed during the Balkan wars and the Great War, that, in order to fulfil their aspirations they had to cooperate with one another. They also had to collaborate with the forces of instability both inside and outside the Ottoman Empire, to act as instruments of those Powers that had a stake in the dissolution of that Empire, to benefit from any Ottoman crisis, or even to provoke such crisis, with the hope that the Powers would intervene on their behalf, and above all, to indulge in a propaganda campaign against Turkey and the Turkish nation. In this, they were believed and assisted by a naive Christian World, which was skilfully manipulated by the powerful, resourcesful and deceitful Christian propaganda organisations and organs all over the world, particularly in Europe and the U.S.A.<sup>14</sup>

In the field of propaganda no one could surpass the Ottoman Christians who used their positions as translators/interpreters in the embassies and consulates of the Great Powers to convince those Powers of their stories, and to sway their relief workers, missionaries and ecclesiastical leaders about the genuineness of their case. Many a time a gullible Western journalist was trapped by their vociferations, and spread their tales. Moreover, European diplomats and travellers within the Ottoman dominions were lured by these people who had the same religion like them, and who usually knew foreign languages, and through them, the tales were more widely spread.

According to the Reverend Dr. Cyrus Hamlin, the first president of the American Robert College at Istanbul (now the Bogazici University), a propaganda bureau was set up in London in the 1870s which had, for its object, the foreign dissemination of all news prejudicial to the Turks. He stated that the onslaught of this "one-sided and unreliable information" about any people would, after a period of years, stir up a hostility and hatred that could not be easily overcome.

"Whenever I pick up a paper of eastern news", declared Hamlin, "I pray, Oh Lord, Endow we with a suitable sense of unbelief".<sup>15</sup>

Because the Turks were inarticulate and religious, had a sense of ditenity, and preferred to suffer in silence rather than to vociferate, the Ottoman Christians and their champions were left unchallenged to spread the wildest myths and message of hate about the Turks and other Muslims. When documentary evidence was needed to substantiate their allegations,

<sup>14</sup> See also Pierre Loti: *La mort de notre chère France en Orient*, Paris 1920, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot Grinnell Mears (ed.): *Modern Turkey*, New York 1924, pp. 4-5.



they invented or forged them without any sense of responsibility of conscience. Their skill in inventing non-existent documents, and in a sense presenting the black as white, and in many cases getting away with it, is confirmed by numerous primary source material in the archives of many countries whose governments were often the target of such brain-washing.<sup>16</sup>

By early 1913 the situation in Anatolia, as a result of the Christian agitation and intrigues with Russia, Britain, France and some of the other Powers, became so acute that, it was prophesied in the British Foreign Office that the break up of the Turkish Empire in Asia, as well as in Europe, appeared not to be far.<sup>17</sup> When the Ottoman Empire got involved in the Great War, the Christian subjects of the Sultan were persuaded to do intelligence work for the Allies, and to undermine the Turkish war effort by covertly collaborating with the enemies of the country. They indulged in agitation, espionage and revolutionary activities, with some of their leaders having secretly pledged their services to the enemy. The archives of the belligerents, particularly the Public Record Office in London, are full of documents indicating the extent of the collaboration of many Ottoman Christians with those Powers that aimed at dismantling the Ottoman Empire and de-Islamising the Middle East. A number of these secret documents have, for the first time, been published in a series of monographs of mine in

<sup>16</sup> See also S. R. Sonyel: "How Armenian propaganda tricked the Christian world in connection with the deportations and 'massacres'", *Bellefen*, v. xli. no. 161, Ankara January 1977, pp. 157-75; Sonyel: *The Turco-Greek Conflict*, Cyprus Turkish Association publication, London 1976; Dimitri Kitsikis: *Propagande et pressions en politique internationale: la Grece et ses revendications a la Conference de la Paix*, Paris 1963; see also Gwynne Dyer: "Turkish 'Falsifiers' and Armenian 'Deceivers': historiography and the Armenian massacres", *Middle Eastern Studies*, v. 12, no. 1, January 1976, pp. 99-107; Harold Armstrong: *Turkey in Travail*, London 1923, pp. 168-9; Sir Harry Luke: *Cities and Men*, II, London 1953, p. 55; Waugh, op. cit., p. 178; Sir Robert Graves: *Storm Centres of the Near East, Personal Memories, 1869-1929*, London 1933, p. 323; Halide Edib: *Turkey Faces West*, New Haven 1930; Edib: *Turkish Ordeal*, London 1928, pp. 5 and 16; Sir Andrew Ryan: *The last of the Dragomans*, London 1951, p. 128; A. Ravlinson: *Adventures in the Near East 1918-22* London 1923, p. 307. Şinasi Orel and Sureyya Yuca have recently published a book in Turkish entitled *Ermenilerce Talat Paşa'ya atfedilen telgrafların gerçek yüzü*, Ankara 1983, part of which has been translated into English and published as a pamphlet by Türkkaya Ataöv: *The Andonian 'documents' attributed to Talat Pasha are forgeries*, Ankara 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Public Record Office, Foreign Office documents F.O. 371/1783/19793: British Ambassador Sir Gerard Lowther to British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, Istanbul confidential despatch dated 26.4.1913, and Foreign Office minutes.



the Turkish Historical Association magazine *Belleten*; they also appeared as pamphlets.<sup>18</sup>

It is abundantly clear, in the light of archival material, that the people of Anatolia, both Muslims and non-Muslims, became unwittingly, reluctantly or voluntarily, the instruments and the victims of the Great Powers that had only one main purpose: their own self-interest, as reflected in the secret agreements they contracted among themselves during the Great War for the partition of the Ottoman Caliphate. In those agreements, as indeed in the Treaty of Lausanne, which wound-up the Ottoman Empire, one searches in vain to find any mention of the promises those Powers made to the non-Muslim subjects of that Empire-promises which they forgot as soon as their own interests were secured.<sup>19</sup>

Neither Russia, Britain and France, the chief protagonists, nor Greece, Italy, Germany, Austria and the U.S.A. can absolve themselves from the responsibility of the great tragedy of the Anatolian people, to which, admittedly, various incompetent Ottoman Ministries must have also contributed. On the other hand, one must not forget the responsibility of some of the leaders of the Ottoman Christian communities, who allowed themselves and influenced their people to become instruments of the Great Powers, and thus contributed tremendously to that tragedy.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Llewellyn Smith: *The Ionian Vision, Greece in Asia Minor, 1919-1922*, London 1973, p. 34; İsmet Parmaksızoğlu: *Ermeni komitelerinin ihtilal hareketleri ve besledikleri emeller*, Ankara 1981, p. 77; Public Record Office, F.O. 371/3410/129455: Vahan Cardashian to Lord Robert Cecil, letter dated New York 8.7.1918; F.O. 371/6575/E 5569: Diran Yachibekian to British Foreign Office, letter dated Paris 11.5.1921; *Documents on Ottoman Armenians*, v. ii, no. 1901 (97), p. 22; Martin Gilbert: *Sir Horace Rumbold: Portrait of a diplomat, 1869-1941*, London 1973, p. 244.

<sup>19</sup> S. R. Sonyel: *Impact International*, 28 October-10 November 1983, p. 5.

