

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

The Position of Religious Minorities in The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Iran

Scientific Report

Orient Institute Istanbul
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Convened by:
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1 Executive summary

The relations between the Muslim majority and the members of its substantial religious minorities (Jews and Christians) in the central lands of the Ottoman Empire and in Iran received a series of new stimuli from the 15th and 16th centuries onwards, which were reflected in intensified encounters in the intellectual, literary, and social spheres.

The most important momentum in the Ottoman Empire for a new social and intellectual flourishing of the Jews in particular was the immigration of Jewish exiles from the Iberian Peninsula in the aftermath of the Spanish Reconquista of 1492. In Safavid and early Qajar Iran (ca. 1500-1850), it was the increasing presence of Christian, initially mainly Catholic, missionaries that constituted the main catalyst. From the 19th century onwards they were joined by Protestant missionaries, mainly from Britain. In the Ottoman Empire, where native Christians of different denominations were numerous, the foreign missionary effort seems to have had less of an impact than in Iran. On the other hand, the Jewish communities in the latter country did not experience the same kind of renaissance enjoyed by their coreligionists in the Ottoman lands.

A large part of the literature which documents or reflects the relations between the Muslim majority and the minorities under its rule in the pre- and early modern periods consists of polemical and apologetical tracts written by Muslims who were concerned about the revival experienced by the other faiths. This type of literature has not so far been examined in a systematic way, and our initial objective was therefore primarily to stimulate the study of this genre and thus to shed new light on the relations between the religions in the Ottoman Empire and particularly its political and cultural centre Istanbul, and simultaneously in Safavid and Qajar Iran, one of the prime targets of European Christian missionaries at the time. However, we realised that by discussing the texts in isolation without regard for their social and political context, we might be creating the impression that they came about in a vacuum or were purely academic exercises. We therefore broadened the original scope of the meeting by bringing together scholars of religion and historians of the Ottoman, Qajar and Safavid empires

who focus on interreligious contacts, in order to start exploring the field from a number of different, yet complementing angles.

2 Scientific content of the event

2.1 Structure of the event

The panels were not strictly arranged according to disciplines and scientific approaches in order to allow for lively discussions and exchanges.

Given the interdisciplinary character of the meeting, the contributions were diverse. Some of them focused on specific (as a rule unedited) textual materials, while others addressed the historical context of the interreligious exchanges. The variety of the sources discussed was enormous, given not only the different religious denominations represented, but also the large number of languages: Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, Syriac, Hebrew, Greek and Armenian, apart from Western European languages.

As for the type of materials discussed, they included, in addition to polemical and apologetical texts, Bible translations, court documents, ecclesiastical documents, missionary records, travel accounts, chronicles, etc.

2.2 Content

After a presentation by the representative of the ESF, Professor Bohuslav Manek, of the structure and funding opportunities of the Foundation, the workshop was opened by the two convenors, Camilla Adang and Sabine Schmidtke. The introduction included a brief survey of the current state of research on interreligious polemical literature from Ottoman Turkey and pre- and early modern Iran, and highlighted the significance of hitherto unexploited manuscript materials in the field. It also explained the aims of the present workshop.

Camilla Adang presented a so-far unedited Muslim polemical text in Arabic against Judaism written by an Ottoman writer of the 15th century, explaining some of the characteristic features of the polemical literature at the time and discussing similarities between this tract and other texts written during the same century in the Ottoman realm.

Yaron Ben-Naeh discussed the socio-religious context of polemical exchanges between the three monotheistic communities in the middle period of the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing the close social relations that existed between members of the different faiths. Among the topics addressed was that of conversion, which was taken up by various other participants.

Paolo Lucca discussed a well-known episode in the history of Ottoman Jewry, viz. the movement of the “false Messiah” Sabbetai Zvi, from a highly original point of view: that of Armenian Christian chroniclers contemporaneous with the events.

Vera Moreen examined a number of representative, yet little studied texts in Judeo-Persian from the Safavid period for what they tell us about the attitudes of Iranian Jews towards Islam and Muslims.

Daniel Tsadik provided a survey of the polemical literature against Jews written by Twelver Shi'ite authors. Although on the whole the Shi'ite literature is very similar to that produced in Sunni circles, various salient features apparently specific to Shi'ite authors were highlighted.

Elisabetta Borromeo gave a close analysis of a series of 17th century nomination documents for Catholic bishops and archbishops in the Ottoman realm, discussing what these documents tell us about the relations between the Ottoman authorities and the official representatives of a religious minority.

Heleen Murre-van den Berg discussed a chapter in the history of the Nestorian Syriac Church of the East, viz. its relations with its Muslim neighbours as reflected in a number of texts in East-Syriac mainly from the 19th century.

Eugenia Kermeli examined a number of cases in which Greek Orthodox Christians appealed to the Ottoman judge in order to obtain a divorce. Needless to say, this practice was severely criticized by the Orthodox clergy, as is clear from the ecclesiastical records discussed here.

Martin Tamcke added a dimension to the discussion of the missionary effort in Turkey and Iran: the missionaries discussed by him were not members of Catholic orders or Protestant churches from the West, but belonged to the Syriac church. The paper discussed the way in which these local Christians made themselves useful to the missionaries coming in from the West.

Rudolph Matthee discussed the changing attitudes of the Safavid rulers and the Iranian elite (including Shi'ite clerics) to Christian missionaries from the West.

Although at first the latter were admired and appreciated as intellectuals and mediators between Iran and Catholic European rulers, support for them waned as the political and religious reality in Iran changed.

Abbas Amanat complemented the presentation by Rudolph Matthee by providing a survey of the genre of Muslim literature against Christianity during the Safavid and Qajar periods. In addition, he presented his current research which is based on a large corpus of hitherto unpublished texts against Christian missionaries from the Qajar period.

Sabine Schmidtke discussed the textual transmission and later reception of the account of a debate reportedly held between the prominent Twelver Shi'ite scholar Bahr al-'Ulum and a number of Jews in the Iraqi town of Dhu 'l-Qifl in 1797, and presented samples from her forthcoming critical edition of the Arabic and Persian versions of the account, which apparently enjoyed great popularity.

Reza Pourjavady focused on one of the most important authors of polemical literature during the Safavid period, the Christian convert to Islam 'Ali Quli Jadid al-Islam, and his (so far unedited) oeuvre. Special attention was given to the author's sources, the extant manuscripts of his works, and their later reception.

Judith Pfeiffer introduced another so-far unpublished, and yet apparently popular, polemical text by a convert to Islam, written in Ottoman Turkish. Apart from a number of sample passages from the text, she discussed the later reception of the work, which is extant in a number of manuscripts in Turkish and European libraries. The question was raised to what extent the fact that the author was of Jewish origin—and therefore able to provide an insider's view—influenced the nature and quality of his arguments against his former coreligionists, in comparison with the approach of other Muslim writers.

Monika Hasenmüller presented yet another unpublished polemical text of unclear authorship, this one directed against Christianity. She discussed the various extant manuscripts and recensions of the work, a salient feature of which is the inclusion of transliterated passages from the Greek New Testament.

The workshop closed with a discussion exploring the main issues raised during the talks and subsequent discussions. Ideas for further collaborative research in the field of interreligious exchanges were suggested and the publication of a volume with the most original contributions in revised form was announced.

3 Assessment

The workshop was regarded by the convenors and the other participants as a highly successful and enriching one. The small scale of the meeting ensured that the speakers had ample time to present their papers and that there was enough time after each presentation for lengthy and fruitful discussions. Although in theory the multitude of areas studied and disciplines represented could lead to fragmentation, it was soon found that the different topics presented and approaches adopted dovetailed. The fact that sources in a variety of languages (e.g., Armenian or Syriac) were discussed and made accessible to those who do not master these languages added much to the value of the workshop, as it made all present realise the importance of collaboration and an interdisciplinary approach.

4 Final Programme

Thursday, 14 June 2007

Morning session (10 am-1 pm) (Chair: Vera B. Moreen)

Opening Remarks

Camilla Adang (Tel Aviv University)

„A hitherto unedited tract of Muslim polemics against Judaism from the Ottoman period“

Yaron Ben-Naeh (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

„A Muslim, a Jew and a Christian meet in the market place“

Paolo Lucca (Ca' Foscari University, Venice)

„Shabbetai Sevi and the Messianic Temptations of Ottoman Jews in the XVIIth Century According to Christian Armenian Sources“

Afternoon session (3-5 pm) (Chair: Camilla Adang)

Vera B. Moreen (Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, Philadelphia)

„Iranian Jewish Attitudes toward Islam as Reflected in Judeo-Persian Literature“

Daniel Tsadik (Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, Philadelphia)

„Some Notes on Imami Shi‘i - Jewish Polemical Exchanges“

Evening

Reception at the Orient-Institut

Friday, 15 June 2007

Morning session (10 am-1 pm) (Chair: Judith Pfeiffer)

Elisabetta Borromeo (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris)

“Le clergé catholique face au pouvoir ottoman: les brevets de nomination (berât) des évêques et des archevêques (XVIIe siècle)”

Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Leiden University)

„Muslim Heretics in Late East-Syriac Texts: The Church of the East and Its Neighbors“

Eugenia Kermeli (Bilkent University, Ankara)

„Sinners in the eyes of God: Canon Law versus Shari‘a Law in the divorce of Ottoman Christians“

Afternoon session (3-5 pm) (Chair: Eugenia Kermeli)

Martin Tamcke (Universität Göttingen)

„Local collaborators of the Missions in Christian-Islamic Controversies in Turkey and Iran“

Rudolph Matthee (University of Delaware)

„Western Missionaries in Safavid Iran: From Protection to Vulnerability“

Saturday, 16 June 2007

Morning session (10 am-1 pm) (Chair: Rudolph Matthee)

Abbas Amanat (Yale University)

„Shi'ite Responses to Christian Polemists in Safavid and Qajar Iran“

Sabine Schmidtke (Freie Universität Berlin)

„Bahr al-'Ulum's disputation with the Jews. A Survey of the Transmission of the debate“

Reza Pourjavady (Freie Universität Berlin)

„'Ali Quli Jadid al-Islam and his *Hidayat al-Dallin*“

Afternoon session (3-5 pm) (Chair: Heleen Murre-van den Berg)

Judith Pfeiffer (University of Oxford)

„The view of the insider: Ibn Abi 'Abd al-Dayyan's *Kashf al-asrar*“

Monika Hasenmüller (Freie Universität Berlin)

„The polemical text *Bayan al-tahrif* and its transmission“

Concluding Discussion (5:30-6:30 pm)

5 Statistical information on participants

The ages of the participants ranged from early twenties to early sixties, most of them in their thirties and forties. Exact data is not available.

The academic positions included professors, senior lecturers, lecturers, research fellows, PhD and MA students.

The list of countries of origin (current citizenship only) are as follows: Germany (4), Greece (1), Iran (1), Israel (2), Italy (2), Netherlands (3), United States (2)

Most of the participants, namely 10 out of 15, were citizens of EU member states, and 2 were from countries with affiliated member status in the ESF.

There were 7 males and 8 females.

6 Final list of participants

The participants were invited on the basis of the convenors' acquaintance with their work. Since our main criteria were relevance to the topic of the workshop and quality of the research, no express attempts were made to include participants from specific countries, although we were very sorry that a Turkish colleague, Dr. Himmet Taşkomür, was unable to attend in the end due to personal reasons. We deliberately invited established as well junior scholars: the latter are the future of the field, and greatly benefited from the experience of the former.

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