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Confessionalism, Centralism, Armenians, and Ottoman Imperial Governance in the 18th and 19th Centuries

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Abstract

This article argues that non-Muslim engagement with 19th-century Ottoman reform should be understood in the context of a confessionalized politics that originally fostered partnerships of governance in the 18th century. The confessionalization of non-Muslim communities in the 18th century, which resulted in the political empowerment of Istanbul-based ethnarchs, promoted the establishment of robust communal boundaries that were more legible to the central state. These arrangements also made non-Muslim communities such as the Armenians partners in governance, responsible for supporting the state's effort to maintain its place atop a contentious imperial politics. The Tanzimat reforms, which reorganized non-Muslim communities and devolved some power from the clergy to the laity, were not a novelty, but instead a renegotiation of non-Muslims' roles in the centralization of state. Rather than embrace secularized identities, non-Muslims enthusiastically used their own religious institutions to promote state centralization. In the process, they reconfigured relations of power in the region that left non-Muslims structurally marginalized.

Keywords: Armenians; confessionalism; non-Muslims; Ottoman Empire; Tanzimat

When he penned a report on the murder of a bishop in October 1864, Hovsep, an Armenian priest based at a small monastery in southeastern Anatolia, confirmed an open secret. Hovsep conceded, as officially recorded, that the victim—Bedros Bülbul, the Armenian Catholicos of Aghtamar—had died at the hands of a Kurd.¹ Official accounts of the slaying, frustrated by a sophisticated cover-up, laid blame at the feet of known Kurdish outlaws. The Kurd whom Hovsep identified as the culprit was no bandit; he had, in fact, been dispatched by another Armenian bishop to commit the crime. That bishop, Khachadur Shiroian, had orchestrated the slaying in the course of an episcopal coup that culminated with his own enthronement and consecration as catholicos. As most in the region knew, Khachadur, unable to make such a bold move unilaterally, had conspired with the family of Khan Mahmud, the famous rebel who had been at the forefront of Bedirkhan Bey's insurrection against the Ottoman state in the 1840s.

Others would later follow Hovsep's example and link the family of a defeated Kurdish rebel with Armenian clergymen in the murder. Collectively, their reports document how provincial elites, particularly those connected with the Kurdish emirates, had established

¹ Hovsep, *Tegheqagir Aghetali Antsits ev Ankarguteants Tann Aghtamaray. Greal Hovsep vardapeti vanahor Narekay vanits* (Constantinople: Tparan R. Y. Kiurkchean, 1873). Bishop Eremia Tevkants, an important provincial reformer, produced another report in 1873. See Tevkants, *Chanaparhordutyun Bardzr Hayk ev Vaspurakan, 1872–73 tt. Dzeragire Patrastel ev Tsanotagrel e H. M. Poghosyan* (Yerevan: GA Hratarakchutyun, 1991).

robust links with the Armenian clergy at Aghtamar that stretched back at least to the 18th century. Hovsep's report stands out among these both for being the first to level these accusations in writing and for reaching beyond description to contextualize the murder in a wider imperial politics that could explain the coconspirators' motivations. The killing, Hovsep argued, came as a response to the Ottomans' efforts to strengthen Istanbul's control in Kurdistan—not by military occupation or expansion of the bureaucracy in the periphery, but through the ecclesiastical institutions of the Armenian Church.² Bedros Bülbül, the victim, had in fact signaled his willingness to participate in ecclesiastical reforms that would have stripped his holy see of most of its autonomy. As a catholicosate, Aghtamar enjoyed the right to consecrate its own bishops and bless the holy chrism.³ That ecclesiastical autonomy had afforded the clergy at Aghtamar freedom to build alliances with the region's Kurdish elites and integrate into local networks of power—the very same networks now targeted by state centralization policies. Hovsep could draw the conclusion that Istanbul would pursue state centralization through the institutions of the Armenian Church because, I argue, he, as well as those implicated in the murder, understood Ottoman governance and non-Muslim subjectivity as part of a confessionalized politics.

For centuries, a politics of religious difference had underwritten Ottoman imperialism, set the terms for non-Muslim engagement with both state and society, and shaped the social and political organization of the imperial polity.⁴ Developments in the 18th century transformed these politics as the state, navigating the tumult precipitated by the domestic reception of the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), pursued policies that promoted the confessionalization of the empire's non-Muslim communities. In the Ottoman context, studies of confessionalization—the hardening of religious communities' boundaries in the service of state formation processes—have generally focused on “Sunnitization,” whereby the state actively developed an Ottoman brand of Sunni orthodoxy to mark itself off from the Safavids' Twelver Shi'ism over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries.⁵ The propagation and embrace of orthodox Sunnism were critical for engendering feelings of loyalty to the sultanate among Muslims, helping the Ottomans secure contested borderland territories in the Caucasus, eastern Anatolia, and Iraq. These processes, however, did not simply render religion a discursive field where Muslim belief converged with state politics; they also conscripted non-Muslim communal institutions into the machinery of empire.

Ottoman non-Muslims integrated into imperial governance and society along several axes, of which the state-subject relationship was only one. Equipped with far-flung

² Hovsep, *Teghekgagir Aghetali Antsits*, 7.

³ The ecclesiastical organization of the Armenian Church in the 19th century reflected the fragmentary nature of both Ottoman imperial governance and Armenian history. The highest seat in the church hierarchy, the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin (in the Iranian and later Russian Caucasus), recognized the Patriarchate of Constantinople as its deputy to the Ottoman government, thus formalizing Constantinople's place atop the Ottoman Armenian community. Three other seats that, at least in theory, enjoyed equal or superior status at the edges of the empire—the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Catholicosate of Cilicia, and the Catholicosate of Aghtamar—regularly challenged Constantinople's claims to authority. Constantinople parried these challenges in part by only employing bishops or using holy chrism (the oil used in baptisms) consecrated by the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin (rather than a catholicos of Aghtamar or Cilicia).

⁴ For a discussion, see Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially 109–96.

⁵ Key contributions to this growing area of inquiry include Tijana Krstić, “Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate: Self-Narratives of Conversion to Islam in the Age of Confessionalization,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 35–63; Guy Burak, “Faith, Law, and Empire in the Ottoman ‘Age of Confessionalization’ (Fifteenth–Seventeenth Centuries): The Case of ‘Renewal of Faith,’” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 28, no. 1 (2013): 1–23; and Derin Terzioğlu, “Where ‘İlm-i Hâl Meets Catechism: Islamic Manuals of Religious Instruction in the Ottoman Empire in the Age of Confessionalization,” *Past and Present* 220 (2013): 79–114. Sebouh Aslanian has discussed Armenian confessionalization in the context of global history; Sebouh David Aslanian, “‘Many have come here and deceived us’: Some Notes on Asateur Vardapet (1644–1728), an Itinerant Armenian Monk in Europe,” *Handes Amsoreay* (2019): 133–94.

ecclesiastical institutions, non-Muslim communities were ideally positioned to act as brokers between networks that constituted a complex multilayered polity in which numerous groups shared in imperial sovereignty. Both the central state and Muslim elites scattered across the empire therefore stood to benefit from the hardening of non-Muslims' boundaries and subsequent empowerment of their religious institutions and leadership. The confessionalization of non-Muslim communities, realized more through state sponsorship of ecclesiastical hierarchy than the dissemination of catechism (although the latter happened as well), accordingly attained greater coherence in the 18th century. The state, desperate to secure its position atop the empire's politics following the Edirne Incident of 1703, a Janissary-led uprising that arguably left the dynasty and its government the most vulnerable it had been in three centuries, turned to a series of power-sharing relationships to stabilize the economy and society. Significant among these efforts was the establishment of life-term tax farming arrangements, which Ariel Salzmann describes as a method of state formation that invested provincial magnates in the longevity of the imperial state.⁶ Life-term tax farming, which relied heavily on non-Muslim financiers, cannot be decoupled from ecclesiastical policies. As I will discuss, the enforcement of more robust communal boundaries and institutions, shepherded by leaders equipped with the means to parry Catholic (and later Protestant) overtures to their flocks, provided the state with another partner for stabilizing society and the economy while dictating the shape the polity should take.

It is to this *longue durée* of state formation and centralization that I seek to locate discussions on non-Muslim communal reform, most of which occurred during the Tanzimat period. The Tanzimat reforms were not cheap facsimiles of European policies.⁷ As becomes clear from the vantage point of non-Muslim experience, the primary aims of reform—centralization of power and authority in institutions of state—had informed the agendas of the Sublime Porte and the palace long before the Tanzimat proclamation of 1839 or even, arguably, the controversial policies introduced by Selim III (r. 1789–1807). This is critical for understanding the role of the post-1856 reforms introduced in the non-Muslim communities, including the Armenian Constitution of 1860.⁸ The Tanzimat changed the nature of centralization and its relationship to the non-Muslim communities, a point easily missed if we situate communal reform in the context of incipient national identity formation.⁹ This article offers a corrective by centering the partnership between the Armenian community, the imperial state, and other groups in society, and analyzing how they changed over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. Confessionalization established robust communal boundaries, which the Armenian community policed to share in the empire's sovereignty and make claims on its politics.¹⁰ Communal boundaries, so defined, endowed the empire-wide ecclesiastical organization of the Armenian Church with greater coherence, which, as I show, Armenian elites used to safeguard their role in tax farming and to forge alliances with state officials, provincial notables, and others.

Armenians thus understood communal reform in the middle decades of the 19th century as a renegotiation of a politics of religious difference that had established the terms of the community's partnership with the state in imperial politics. Changes to the ecclesiastical organization of the Armenian Church necessarily threatened a whole host of arrangements

⁶ Ariel Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire: Rival Paths to the Modern State* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 11. See also Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷ Butrus Abu Manneh, "The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript," *Die Welt Des Islams* 34, no. 2 (1994): 173–203.

⁸ Communal charters were introduced into the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish communities. For partial Turkish translations of each, see Cenk Reyhan, "Osmanlı'da Millet Nizamnameleri: Avrupa İle Uyum Sürecinde Rum-Ermeni-Yahudi Cemaat Düzenlemeleri," *Belgeler* 28, no. 31 (2006): 45–90.

⁹ Studies that connect non-Muslim nationalism with the Tanzimat typically fail to appreciate the extent to which non-Muslim communal institutions were already integrated into structures of governance.

¹⁰ On layered or shared sovereignty, see Lauren Benton, "Empires of Exception: History, Law, and the Problem of Imperial Sovereignty," *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali*, 6 (2007): 54–67.

in which multiple actors were invested. Bedros Bülbül's willingness to cede a substantial portion of Aghtamar's autonomy and subject his catholicosate to the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the 1860s threatened not only members of the Armenian clergy and Armenian merchants and moneylenders in the region, but also Kurdish elites and a handful of government officials who benefited from networks organized by confessionalization. Reform was not a simple devolution of power from clergy to laity.¹¹ This is why reformers considered ecclesiastical reorganization a pathway to Ottoman political power through the institutions of the Armenian Church. Ottoman Armenian statesmen and their allies among the clergy, such as Bishop Mkrtych Khirmian, introduced policies that made the Armenian Church a scaffolding of the imperial bureaucracy in the second half of the 19th century and employed Ottomanism as a framework to realize it. Extricating communal institutions from networks targeted by centralization policies, the reformers reasoned, made them partners of state. The more fully defined communal administration that reformers struggled to create proved all the more easy to identify, subject to greater scrutiny, and then isolate from networked structures of power. Like secularization in nation-states, the provision of greater control over religious institutions to the state did not benefit groups that had suffered structural discrimination due to their confession of faith, but instead exacerbated extant social and political cleavages between communities. Hovsep was correct: the state did work through the institutions of the Armenian Church to centralize a periphery such as Kurdistan. Centralization, however, entailed the unmaking of a confessionalized politics that had assigned the Armenian community a seminal role in imperial governance. Ottoman forays into secularization in fact severed pathways for non-Muslim integration into the imperial body politic, catalyzed the marginalization of Armenians in imperial society, and laid the groundwork for a polity based on Muslim coalition building.¹²

Partners of the Porte: *Amiras* and the Patriarchate in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The strife among clergymen that led to the murder of Bedros Bülbül was precipitated largely by the Tanzimat reforms of the mid-19th century, which had tremendous implications for the administration of governance and the exercise of imperial sovereignty. Inaugurated by the Gülhane edict of October 1839, the Tanzimat brought sweeping changes to the empire, including the supposed introduction of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims in the public sphere, abolition of tax farming, reform of the military, and expansion of the state's bureaucracy. For all its pomp, the Tanzimat was not a rupture so much as one of a series of reconfigurations of partnerships and power-sharing arrangements established in the 18th century.¹³ Non-Muslim communities and their ecclesiastics played a crucial role in establishing and mediating those arrangements.

The fiscal reforms of the late 17th and early 18th centuries introduced political stability to an Ottoman realm that had endured periods of tumult. The introduction of life-term tax farming appointments in particular encouraged administrative continuity and regional economic development. The subsequent aggrandizement of provincial notables, who exploited life-term appointments to consolidate holdings, was once understood as administrative

¹¹ For relevant examples, see Dimitris Stamatopolous, "From Millets to Minorities in the 19th Century Ottoman Empire: An Ambiguous Modernization," in *Citizenship in Historical Perspective*, ed. Steven G. Ellis, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, and Ann Katherine Isaacs (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, 2006), 253–73; and Aylin Koçunyan, *Negotiating the Ottoman Constitution, 1839–1876* (Paris: Peetes, 2018).

¹² Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹³ I build upon the argument on partnerships Ali Yaycıoğlu advances in *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). Molly Greene connects this argument with developments in the Orthodox community in *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1453–1768: The Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

decentralization.¹⁴ Subsequent scholarship has instead shown how life-term tax farming appointments in fact redeployed the central state's coercive and administrative capacity.¹⁵ Moreover, the formation of a more easily discernible cohort of elites, invested as they now were in state institutions, made it possible for Istanbul to establish partnerships in governance on largely favorable terms.

The "microeconomies of power" that structured imperial governance in the 18th century produced a layered imperial sovereignty that the state shared with other legitimate claimants on the empire's politics.¹⁶ A complex series of exchanges that traversed economic, social, cultural, and religious arenas produced a constellation of alliances that ensconced various forms of power both inside and outside of official organs of state. As such, the central state was able to exert its influence over a wide array of actors—Janissaries, provincial notables, households, and others—and pull them toward the sultanate and the official bureaucracy. For the state, winnowing of the political field rendered the realm more legible, making it easier to navigate fallout stemming from a spate of crises that threatened a brittle political structure, including military setbacks, fiscal insolvency, and the frequent challenges by Janissary-led alliances that had come to characterize the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The intertwined processes of articulating more clearly defined categories of rule and searching for partnerships extended to the empire's non-Muslim communities.

Confessionalization was not a phenomenon insular to religious communities and therefore not reducible to analyses of psalters or other religious texts; it was, as scholars of the Reformation have long established, not the abode of church history, but seminal to making the social and political systems of a polity. The methods of realizing confessional unity shaped state structures and other forms of governance could take.¹⁷ Among the empire's Muslims, enforcement of Sunni orthodoxy was critical for establishing a deep-seated political fealty to the sultanate. The confessionalized organization and consolidation of non-Muslim communities and their institutions was embedded in these processes as it related to centering the sultan and his government in imperial politics, setting the terms for non-Muslim engagement with imperial governance and society. Contrary to the image conjured by Protestant missionaries, neither Armenian nor Greek Orthodox patriarchs ruled autocratically.¹⁸ The transformation "from patriarch to patriarchate," whereby Constantinople (in both the Greek and Armenian communities) attained greater ecclesiastical authority, only commenced in the early years of the 18th century.¹⁹ Berats conferred on the Ecumenical Patriarchate (the Patriarchate of Constantinople), edicts that delineated a person or institution's privileges granted by the sultan, demonstrate as much.²⁰ A similar process unfolded among the Apostolic Armenians, with whom the patriarchate began consolidating its position as the community's preeminent ecclesiastical authority most notably during the long tenure of Hovhannes Kolot (r. 1715–41). The expansion of ecclesiastical authority was bound up with stricter policing of communal boundaries that tied the

¹⁴ On the so-called Age of Ayans, see Bruce McGowan, "The Age of Ayans," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 2, ed. Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 637–757.

¹⁵ Ariel Salzmann, "An Ancien Régime Revisited: 'Privatization' and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Theory and Politics* 21, no. 4 (1993): 395.

¹⁶ Salzmann, "Ancien Régime"; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Heinz Shilling, "Confessionalization in the Empire: Religious and Societal Change in Germany between 1555 and 1620," in *Religion, Political Culture and the Emergence of Early Modern Society: Essays in German and Dutch History*, ed. Heinz Shilling (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 205–45.

¹⁸ Consider H. G. O. Dwight, *Christianity in Turkey: A Narrative of the Protestant Reformation in the Armenian Church* (London, 1854), 84.

¹⁹ Molly Greene introduces the phrase in a chapter appropriately entitled "The Patriarch's Victory"; Greene, *Edinburgh History*, 163–89.

²⁰ Elif Bayraktar-Tellan and Hasan Çolak, *The Orthodox Church as an Ottoman Institution: A Study of Early Modern Patriarchal Berats* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2019). On berats, see Maurits van den Boogert, *The Capitulations and the Ottoman Legal System: Qadis, Consuls, and Beratlis in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

Armenian Church to the imperial state in a manner that paralleled Muslim confessionalization. The patriarch under whose reign these processes commenced in the Armenian community, Avetik (r. 1702–3, 1704–6), owed his ascent to an unlikely patron, the Kadızadelis.²¹ Leaders of a revivalist brand of Islam, the Kadızadelis encouraged a turn to piety in Ottoman politics that emphasized Sunni orthodoxy.²² Doing so made them powerful ideologues of state and throne. The admonishments they delivered from the pulpit—particularly on Fridays at mosques in Istanbul endowed by the royal family—targeted the regime’s opponents. Injunctions against Sufis and coffeehouses, for example, took aim at the social bases of support for the Janissary corps, which frequently resorted to arms as a check on sultanic authority.²³ They also encouraged discrimination against non-Muslims, such as enforcement of sumptuary laws; this was likely another assault on the Janissaries, who enjoyed longstanding relationships with non-Muslim guildsmen, merchants, and moneylenders in urban centers.²⁴ Kadızadeli insistence on the segregation of imperial society’s various components into more easily discernible categories led them to a Christian partner.

The last major Kadızadeli preacher, Mehmed Feyzullah Efendi (1639–1703) found a kindred spirit in Avetik when both held posts in eastern Anatolia in the late 17th century.²⁵ Avetik, the Armenian prelate of Erzincan at the time, used his position to harass Armenian converts to Catholicism and undermine French missionary work; this endeared him to Feyzullah, who reviled the French consular officials operating in nearby Erzurum. More importantly, Avetik’s proactive policing of communal boundaries resonated with Feyzullah’s own ideological commitment to the fashioning of bounded groups in imperial society. Feyzullah, appointed sheikh ül-Islam by Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695–1703) in 1695, ignored precedent and unilaterally installed Avetik as the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople in 1702. From his new position, Avetik persecuted Catholic Armenians to marginalize them within the community and preclude them from having any role in its administration.²⁶ Armenian confessionalization was rooted less in catechism, dogma, or piety than in ecclesiastical unity. Although Feyzullah and Avetik did not survive—the former was murdered during the Janissary-led uprising in 1703 known as the Edirne Incident, and the latter died in captivity after being kidnapped by the French—the subordination of doctrinal dispute to ecclesiastical resilience obtained as the *modus vivendi* in the Armenian community as a condition of its partnership with the state. Repression of Catholics occasionally interrupted the *détente* established within the community, whenever boundaries needed reinforcing or political scores settling.²⁷ The expansion of the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople continued and laid down the administrative edifice for the Ottoman Armenian diocese eventually legislated by the Armenian Constitution in 1860.

Confessionalization made the Armenian Church a contested political site, the efficacy of its role in governance predicated on the ability of its clergymen to enforce communal boundaries and fashion a robust ecclesiastical organization. Clergymen so empowered

²¹ Cesare Santus, “Şeyhülislam Feyzullah Efendi and the Armenian Patriarch Avetik: A Case of Entangled Confessional Disciplining?” in *Entangled Confessionalizations? Dialogic Perspectives on the Politics of Piety and Community Building in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Tijana Krsti and Derin Terzioğlu (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, forthcoming), 241–63. I thank Cesare Santus for sharing this important essay with me.

²² On the Kadızadelis, see Marc David Baer, “Honored by the Glory of Islam”: *Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²³ Cemal Kafadar, “Janissaries and Other Riffraff of Ottoman Istanbul: Rebels without a Cause?” *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (2007): 113–34.

²⁴ Robert Olson, “Esnaf and Patrona Halil Rebellion: A Realignment in Ottoman Politics?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17, no. 3 (1974): 329–44.

²⁵ Santus, “Feyzullah,” 8.

²⁶ Avetik selectively leveled accusations of harboring Catholic sentiments to consolidate his own position, whether it be to remove prelates opposed to his patriarchal rule or to extort the affluent. See Cesare Santus, *Transgressioni necessarie: Comunicatio in sacris, coesistenza e conflitti tra le comunità cristiane orientali (Levante e Impero Ottomano, XVII–XVIII secolo)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2019), 357–59.

²⁷ Santus likewise argues that anti-Catholic persecution was more political than religious; *Transgressioni*, 372–75.

enjoyed not only an elevated position before state officials, but also a social and cultural cachet that could prove useful to provincial elites. Significantly, jurisdictional expansion and a concomitant ecclesiastical centralization coincided with other developments. As noted, the fiscal restructurings elaborated at the end of the 17th century enabled a host of provincial elites to entrench themselves in positions of power on terms largely palatable to the state. It also vaulted moneylenders with cash on hand, overwhelmingly non-Muslims, to positions of influence.²⁸ Centralization of ecclesiastical authority was therefore entwined with the rise of a distinct lay Armenian elite, the *amiras*.²⁹ They—known to us by an honorific that they seem to have conferred on themselves—appeared as a distinct sociopolitical formation in the Ottoman capital sometime during the first third of the 18th century.³⁰ Most belonged to mercantile families with roots in Akn (Eğin, or modern-day Kemaliye) who originally generated fortunes through long-distance trade.³¹ In the capital, they congregated in two occupations that allied them with the state. Many were prominent moneylenders who, collectively, were the near exclusive bankers to both the palace and statesmen at the Porte, underwrote large swathes of the state's activities (including tax farming), and had displaced their Jewish rivals as the empire's preeminent financiers by the end of the 18th century. Others applied their technocratic know-how to assume stewardship of several state functions, such as oversight of the imperial mint, the production of gunpowder, and the construction of imperial buildings.³²

Amiras used the wealth produced by their investments in Ottoman governance and economy, particularly tax collection, to patronize their own community. Philanthropy was political. The *amiras*' roles—financier, technocrat, and philanthropist—provided them with a strategic location in the politics that obligated state and provincial elite to one another. Those politics ultimately allied a confessionalized Armenian community with the state. Patronage of the community, from this vantage point, reads less like charity than it does purchase of an institution—the Armenian Church—that shared in the empire's sovereignty. Like others in Ottoman society, the *amiras* exploited pious foundations to project their power.³³ Under the guise of benevolence, *amiras* seized command of the patriarchate and had themselves appointed trustees (or *mütevellîs*) of most Armenian religious institutions in the Ottoman Empire.³⁴ As trustees, the *amiras* controlled the finances of the Armenian Church throughout the Ottoman domain, which they used to bring incredible pressure to bear on clergymen across the empire—the same clergymen whom an Ottoman politics of difference had vaulted to the fore as community representatives.³⁵ Clergymen brokering

²⁸ Onnik Jamgocyan, *Les Banquiers des Sultans: Juifs, Grecs, Français Arméniens de la haute finance, Constantinople, 1650-1850* (Paris: Les Editions du Bosphore, 2013), 113–27; for non-Muslim bankers' connections with different factions in imperial politics, see 71–112.

²⁹ Hagop Barsoumian, "The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1980).

³⁰ Kevork Bardakjian proposes an etymology for the term *amira* in "Ottoman Servants, Armenian Lords: The Rise of the *Amiras*," *Journal for the Society of Armenian Studies* 26 (2017): 17–38.

³¹ Arakel Kechean, *Akn ev Akntsik* (Paris: Achemean, 1952).

³² Hagop Barsoumian, "The Dual Role of the Armenian *Amiras* within the Ottoman Government and the Armenian Millet," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, vol. 1, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 171–84. On architects, see Alyson Wharton, *The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople: The Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

³³ John Robert Barnes, *An Introduction to Religious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), 118–53. Centralization policies targeted the wanton mismanagement of *vakıfs* (religious endowments), an endemic feature of imperial society, in the 19th century. See also Dimitris Stamatopoulos, "Rum Millet between Vakıfs and Property Rights: Endowments' Trials of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Mixed Council in the Late Ottoman Empire (19th–20th Centuries)," *Endowment Studies* 2 (2018): 58–81.

³⁴ Barsoumian, "Armenian Amira Class." *Mütevelli* appointments were sometimes recorded in financial records submitted to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. For an example, see Bibliothèque Nubar (hereafter BNU) 125/P.I.3.2 (1820–21).

³⁵ In Van, for example, elites dissuaded a highly decorated monastery abbot from his reformist inclinations when the *mütevelli* denied him access to resources in the 1850s; BNU CP 23/1 #022-025.

relations with provincial elites did so on behalf of the state-backed *amiras* in the capital; failure to do so could result in financial ruin for provincial clergymen and a subsequent loss of influence in local or regional circles.

Empowerment of the Patriarchate of Constantinople made the Armenian Church a compelling investment opportunity for *amiras* seeking to reinforce their position as the state's preferred financiers: a far-flung yet sufficiently centralized institution that placed them in contact with the provincial regimes of power that the state hoped to cultivate. The *amiras* in turn used that institution as an instrument for integrating their financial and political capital in all corners of the empire. By influencing the clergy, performing functions of state, and underwriting tax farming, the *amiras* committed the community to a politics that bolstered the state's standing atop a complex imperial polity. State sponsorship of the church's centralization was not solely an effort to facilitate rule over a non-Muslim community; it helped ensure that the various threads tying the empire together were spun from a spool in Istanbul of the state's choosing.

Confessionalized Space, Reform, and Shifting Partnerships

The confessionalization of communal space and the concomitant transformation from patriarch to patriarchate contributed to the configuration of relations of power in imperial governance and society. The various forms of power Armenians could wield—religious, social, economic, and even political—necessarily coursed through the institutions of the Armenian Church, which the *amiras* then harnessed in service of the state (and consequently to their own immense advantage). The progressive codification of prerogatives, sometimes through forgery or invocation of the “old ways,” enshrined the terms of the state-community partnership in imperial law.³⁶ Confessionalization also integrated the language of Armenian Christianity into the lexicon of Ottoman politics and law. Armenian efforts to challenge *amira* appropriation of the community's share of sovereignty, and by extension how Armenians mediated Ottoman governance and society, therefore had to be composed in ecclesiastical terms. The making of the constitution and its legislation of a diocese in the middle of the 19th century thus need to be framed in the context of a much longer history of political contention to elucidate its connections to other developments in Ottoman society and understand the violent reaction it provoked.

Social tensions between *amiras* and Armenian guildsmen played some role in generating the Armenian Constitution. Resentment against the *amiras*, who denied others access to the benefits they reaped from controlling community institutions, spilled into the open in the 1830s and 1840s.³⁷ Such public expressions suggested that the *amiras*—like the Greek Orthodox Phanariots in 1821—could no longer commit their community to the status quo. To mollify communal unrest, the *amiras* selected Matteos Chukhajian (r. 1844–48) as patriarch, a clergyman known to have pro-guild sympathies. During his reign, Chukhajian introduced legislative changes that curbed *amira* influence. Although most *amiras* opposed his policies, he counted some among his allies. Scions of *amira* families likewise authored the constitution.³⁸ Understanding this shift among *amira* factions requires returning the discussion to how the Armenian community had partnered with the imperial state. The tightening of ecclesiastical administration was consonant with changes in statecraft, as 18th-century

³⁶ Non-Muslims curated history to establish the timelessness of their communal prerogatives. For an example, consider the Armenian translation of “The Covenant of ‘Ali,” which supposedly awarded Armenians prerogatives in exchange for loyalty in 660 A.D., was made in St. Petersburg in 1767, and then was authenticated in Istanbul in 1804 (Wharton, *Architects*, 11).

³⁷ By way of comparison, similar instability reigned in the Greek Orthodox community, where twelve patriarchal elections took place during the period between 1830 and 1860.

³⁸ Chukhajian's allies included Hagop Grjigian, an adviser to Reşid Pasha, and the ostentatious moneylender Mkrtich Jezayirlian.

shared sovereignty and management gave way to the top-down interventionism of the New Order and then the Tanzimat.

To perpetuate the partnership, Apostolic Armenians first had to maintain the integrity of a confessional community—and thus control over the ecclesiastical who exercised imperial sovereignty. Both the state and the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, the highest seat in the Armenian Church but located outside the Ottoman Empire in the Iranian (and later Russian) Caucasus, had supported the transfer of Armenian dioceses in the Ottoman Empire to the immediate jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the second half of the 18th century. Constantinople had to validate the trust the church and the state had invested in it. A renewal of the Catholic issue in the 1810s, which was connected with tumult at the patriarchate, posed a significant challenge to both the community and the state.³⁹ At the latter's urging, which included the personal intervention of the sultan's confidant Halet Efendi, Catholic and Apostolic Armenians in the capital convened a council in 1820 that aimed to bridge liturgical and canonical divides to preserve the unity of the community and its institutions.⁴⁰ The effort predictably failed—neither the Vatican nor Armenian authorities were prepared to make the requisite concessions—compelling a number of Armenian elites to flee the capital after failing to do the government's bidding. A similar logic animated Chukhajian's patriarchal reign. As the councils he introduced curbed clergymen's unwritten prerogatives, he also excommunicated Protestant converts to remove them from positions of influence and preserve ecclesiastical unity.⁴¹ An ecclesiastically weakened community stood less chance of perpetuating its partnership with the state.

Further tightening non-Muslim ecclesiastical administrations proved important to an Ottoman state desperate to navigate the chaotic 1820s and 1830s, decades that included a number of interconnected watersheds such as the Greek rebellion, Muhammad 'Ali's continued aggrandizement and later occupation of Syria, and of course the destruction of the Janissary corps in 1826. During this same period, the state sponsored the introduction of statutes into the administration of the Armenian community that made ecclesiastical hierarchies clearer and robust.⁴² This paralleled developments among other non-Muslim communities. Imperial *berats* issued in 1834 and 1835 institutionalized the *hahambaşı* (chief rabbi) as head of an empire-wide Jewish community.⁴³ Neo-Phanariot proponents of imperial reform began their ascent around the same time that Ecumenical Patriarch Grigorios VI (r. 1835–40) launched anti-simony campaigns to further centralize ecclesiastical authority in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁴⁴ The Armenian statutes reinforced Constantinople's position atop the community's administrative structures,

³⁹ Maghakia Ormanean, *Azgapatum: Hay ughghapar ekeghetsvoy antskere skizben minchev mer orere yarakits azgayin paraganerov patmuats: mas errorrd, 1808 tarien minchev 1909* (Jerusalem: S. Hakobeants, 1927), 2314–26. Greek and Latin encroachment on Armenian property in Jerusalem exacerbated divisions in the empire-wide Armenian community, which had to rely on relationships with government officials—many of them brokered by Catholic Armenians—to parry the Greeks and the Latins. It also was during this time that the Armenian Church began publishing psalters and other religious texts with greater frequency, much of it in the demotic hybrid language Armeno-Turkish used by Armenians in western Anatolia to combat Catholic incursions.

⁴⁰ *Ban hraver siroy. Or araji arne zpataskhani khndrots inch inch masants havatoy, est Lusavorchavad vardapetutean Hayastaneayts arakelakan Ekeghetsvoy* (Constantinople: Tparan arapean Poghosi, 1820). Halet Efendi, a former diplomat and adviser to the sultan, was arguably the most significant state official to intervene directly in Armenian affairs since Feyzullah over a century earlier.

⁴¹ *Haytatarutiun erkrord enddem noraghandits* (Constantinople, 1846).

⁴² See the versions of the *Sahman Azgayin Zhoghovoy* produced in 1820, 1826, and 1830, the latter two published as booklets.

⁴³ See Ilan Karmi, *The Jewish Community of Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century: Social, Legal, and Administrative Transformations* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Jack Fairey, *The Great Power and Orthodox Christendom: The Crisis over the Eastern Church in the Era of the Crimean War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 76. Grigorios VI did so to prevent external influences from dictating episcopal appointments. He also took aim at Protestant missionary activity. Simony, or the purchase of church offices or ecclesiastical privileges, had emerged as a problem in both the Greek and Armenian communities.

bolstering a communal organization crucial to the exercise of Ottoman sovereignty. They also committed the church to providing public goods to their flock.⁴⁵ Much like the anti-simony campaigns in the Orthodox community, efforts to curb the unofficial or semiofficial methods Armenian elites deployed to curry favor with the government and influence the clergy (such as payment of the *pişkeş*, or admission money, upon the ascension of a new patriarch) redistributed some share of communal power to the guilds and others. These developments suggested that non-elite Armenians could deploy communal institutions to serve community interests.

And so the partnership between the Porte and the community shifted—the promise of Armenian access to the state was now predicated on dismantling the relationships brokered through Armenian Church institutions and instead transferring power to official bodies. The institutionalization of the community that culminated with the Armenian Constitution of 1860 accelerated the politicization of the Armenian Church as a contested site of power over which two visions for imperial governance battled. Some *amiras* already had found themselves drawn to the top-down politics of the Tanzimat, making them unlikely allies of the guildsmen. Many transitioned seamlessly; they bankrolled the court and the Porte, and their technocratic expertise cohered with the worldview of Selim III's New Order (1789–1807).⁴⁶ Financial or ideological commitments to centralization aside, state service proved a prudent choice. Armenians disproportionately populated a roster of *sarrafs* (moneylenders) whose estates, lives, or both were seized by the state in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁴⁷ Unlike the Phanariots, *amiras* could not establish households, or *hanedans*, leaving them more vulnerable to political volatility.⁴⁸ Bureaucratic work therefore proved enticing: a relatively secure career where salaries, prestige, and connections could be easily had. Armenians flocked there, their gain coming at Phanariot expense. The establishment of the Ottoman Translation Bureau in 1821 as a response to the Greek rebellion ended Phanariot domination of crucial government work—that of dragoman, a translator who mediated social, cultural, commercial, or diplomatic relations between the Ottomans and foreigners—and folded it into the state bureaucracy.⁴⁹ Some Armenian employees of the translation bureau later won appointment as advisers and diplomats.

Just as the state, in its bid to strip the work of government from those with whom it shared power, had come for the Phanariots in 1821, and the Janissaries (and their Jewish financiers) in 1826, so, too, would it come for the Armenian *amiras* in 1839. The abolition of tax farming integrated a primary arena of *amira* service to the state directly into the official bureaucracy. Relationships with Ottoman officials, private lending, and commerce ensured that the *amiras*' presence remained embedded in imperial society well after they ceased profiting from tax farming. Their influence proved most potent in the Armenian Church, the primary institution through which *amiras* had woven their capital into imperial society. Clergymen in the provinces who had benefited from these arrangements remained embedded in alliances with local officials and regional power brokers whom they could activate to defend their prerogatives. Entrenched reaction awaited the reformers' attempts to reorganize an Ottoman politics of difference.

⁴⁵ The statutes charged the church, in oblique terms, with promoting the material and educational welfare of Armenians in the provinces and elsewhere.

⁴⁶ Ali Yaycioğlu, "Guarding Traditions and Laws—Disciplining Bodies and Souls: Tradition, Science, and Religion in the Age of Ottoman Reform," *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 5 (2018): 1542–1603.

⁴⁷ Araks Şahiner, "The Sarrafs of Istanbul: Financiers of Empire" (MA thesis, Boğaziçi University, 1995), 62–63.

⁴⁸ Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 5–37. The Phanariots' ability to organize households was unique among non-Muslims; the Armenians, as discussed here, typically tied their fate to the state (perhaps why they were called the "loyal millet"), whereas the Jewish community was closer to the Janissaries.

⁴⁹ Carter Findley, "The Acid Test of Ottomanism: The Acceptance of Non-Muslims in the Late Ottoman Bureaucracy," in Braude and Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, 339–68.

Social Capital, Communal Reform, and the Reaction

Bedros Bülbül, the prelate murdered by his successor, had wished to postpone his consecration as Catholicos of Aghtamar in 1858 until after he had received permission from Constantinople—and, consequently, the blessings of the Sublime Porte—to proceed with the ceremony.⁵⁰ In so doing, Bedros effectively recognized Aghtamar's ecclesiastical subordination to Constantinople and the right of the latter to intervene in the affairs of the former. Khachdur Shiroian—the man who later orchestrated the murder of Bedros and seized the catholicosate—understood the consequences. Whereas recognition of Constantinople's temporal authority provided Aghtamar with access to networks propped up by *amira* largesse, full subordination would rob their clergymen of the autonomy necessary to forge relationships that produced such power structures. Shiroian and his allies therefore pressured Bedros to proceed without authorization. Understanding not only why he acquiesced in the first place, but why that acquiescence failed to save him six years later, casts light on how the Tanzimat negated Armenian social capital while violently unmaking a confessionalized political culture.

Those who act as gatekeepers between differentiated groups enmeshed in relationships predicated on mutual obligations by forging brokerage and closure can garner social capital.⁵¹ Provincial Armenian clergymen—located between the patriarchate (and therefore also the Sublime Porte), *amiras*, their own religious community, local governors, and regional Muslim elites—were ideally positioned to do just that. The sharing of imperial sovereignty made possible by the confessionalization of Ottoman politics afforded non-Muslim deputies—the clergy—greater capacity for accessing state coercion. Such access, bolstered by the ecclesiastics of the Armenian Church and *amira* financing, allowed the clergy to establish firm control over much of its flock; the consequent authority—the forging of closure within the community—was a powerful bargaining chip in the hands of clergymen negotiating with either the regional power brokers or provincial governors among whom they brokered. Clergymen so positioned could extract resources from their own community to make imperial society function on terms favorable to the *amiras* and others.

Evidence recorded over the course of protracted battles over communal reform in the second half of the 19th century not only catalogs how the Armenian clergy exploited their own flock to broker between the state and provincial elites, but also offers a window into how they had done so over the preceding several decades. The most well-known examples come from Van, where reactionary priests waged a decades-long war against the reformers and their allies in the clergy.⁵² They intimidated and beat their opponents, sometimes calling on either Kurdish tribal leaders or state actors to deliver the blows. From their flock, the clergy extracted both taxes and forced labor, which endeared them to both the state and regional elites. Establishing positive relations with both was especially useful in a region undergoing what Sabri Ateş describes as a transformation from borderland to “bordered land.”⁵³ Both the state and Kurdish tribal leaders, many of whom turned either to banditry or rebellion to defy centralization, sought the conciliatory mediation of Armenian clergymen to resolve issues between them.⁵⁴ In some cases, the government had to deputize Armenian priests to communicate with Kurdish leaders who had fled to Iran as fugitives.

⁵⁰ Matteo Izmirlean, *Hayrapetutiun Hayastaneats Arakelakan Ekeghetsvoy ev Aghtamar u Sis* (Constantinople: Zardarean, 1881), 413–19.

⁵¹ Following Karen Barkey's discussion on Ottoman imperial formation in *Empire of Difference*, I also employ Ronald Burt's definition of social capital. Ronald S. Burt, *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵² Some of the most egregious cases are described in the booklet *Ampastanutiune Vanay Poghos vardapetin vray* (Constantinople, 1874).

⁵³ Sabri Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843–1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵⁴ *Ampastanutiune* details relevant examples. See also Hakob Shahpazean, *Kiurto-hay patmutiun* (Constantinople, 1911).

In other cases, priests were called on as trustworthy mediators to settle disputes between rival Kurdish leaders.

Similar examples played out across the Ottoman Armenian world in places such as Jerusalem, Damascus, Ankara, Erzurum, and Cilicia. Aghtamar was yet one more example of how Armenian clergymen deployed brokerage and closure to help construct and participate in local regimes of power. By the 19th century, the Order of Aghtamar had established relationships with regional Kurdish notables, particularly the family of Khan Mahmud; this is why the Patriarchate of Constantinople began working in earnest to reduce the status of Aghtamar from catholicosate to simple prelacy in the 1840s at the height of the Kurdish rebellion led by Khan Mahmud and Bedirkhan Bey.⁵⁵ The collapse of the uprising in 1847 left the clergy without its most powerful patron, affording Constantinople the opportunity to impose new rules that abolished much of Aghtamar's ecclesiastical autonomy. In particular, these rules aimed to undermine the clergy's ability to forge relationships across communal boundaries by restricting their mobility. The outwardly contrite response to these developments by clerical leaders at Aghtamar allowed its clergy space to rebuild the relationships needed to maintain control over their dioceses. The selection of a non-Aghtamar clergyman as catholicos in 1852—in fact a violation of church canon—suggested that the catholicosate's leadership took seriously Constantinople's wish that the catholicosate distance itself from the Kurdish rebels whom the Ottoman state had defeated only a few years prior. An outsider, however, lacked knowledge about his dioceses' integration into the region or how to build relationships to challenge the priests who profited from such arrangements. Clergymen such as Khachatur Shiroian therefore found themselves free to rekindle ties with the family of Khan Mahmud as well as with local judges, officials, and other notables.⁵⁶

Bedros understood it was not only Shiroian pressuring him to agree to the early consecration ceremony. His acquiescence soured relations with Constantinople and weakened his position against an ascendant Shiroian, who began using the catholicosate to amass a personal fortune.⁵⁷ The introduction of the Armenian National Constitution, the next and most important phase in consolidating Ottoman Armenian ecclesiastical organization, threatened to reverse the victories scored by Shiroian and his allies among the clergy and the laity. Originally ratified by the Sublime Porte in 1860, the constitution was temporarily suspended in 1862 before the state approved its reintroduction in 1863 following a revision. Both versions of the document targeted the methods used by clergymen such as Shiroian to cultivate prerogatives and enmesh themselves in relationships of power by legislating a diocese, headed by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, composed of provincial prelacies based in major cities.

Unlike the Greek Orthodox Church—where a diocesan bishop is called a metropolitan—the Armenian Apostolic Church developed as part of the feudal *nakharar* system of the ancient and medieval periods that eschewed cities or their construction. Episcopal authority was instead vested in provincial monasteries that remained physically distant from most political or commercial centers that emerged over the centuries, and therefore less responsive to popular controls. Comfortably insulated monasteries could ignore the longstanding tradition of lay participation in ecclesiastical affairs and select well-connected clergymen from their own ranks as provincial prelates, who in turn served as spiritual shepherds and representatives before the government.⁵⁸ The constitution stripped power from the monasteries and ordered that prelates be selected through indirect popular elections and

⁵⁵ For the text of the regulations, see Izmirlean, *Hayrapetutiun Hayastaneats*, 328–44.

⁵⁶ Hovsep, *Tegheqagir Aghetali Antsits*, 11–12. Shiroian later conspired with many of them to kill Bedros.

⁵⁷ Bedros once chastised Shiroian as little more than a tax collector (“*milutazim*” in provincial Armenian pronunciation). See Tevkants, *Chanabarhordutyun*, 176.

⁵⁸ The right to select a prelate formally belonged to the Patriarch of Constantinople. In practice, he typically had little option but to endorse a prelate who enjoyed the support of both the resident clergy and the monastery's trustee, invariably an *amira*.

take residence in cities where provincial governors sat; this produced a gridded ecclesiastical system graphed onto a reorganized Ottoman provincial administration that attained greater coherence in the 1860s and 1870s.⁵⁹ A provincial prelate, selected by a provincial assembly, represented his community to the provincial governor; he was in turn subordinate to the Patriarch of Constantinople, selected by a national assembly (itself composed of delegates elected from across the empire), who represented the flock to the Sublime Porte. Common Armenians would theoretically enjoy clear lines of access to both the provincial governor and, should he fail to deliver justice, a route to the Sublime Porte. Moreover, the constitution severed the connection between *amiras* and the clergy by abolishing the trustee system and instead placing oversight of community finances under a council of laymen in the capital.⁶⁰

Infringements on the clergy's ability to ensconce communal institutions in networks of power provoked a reaction. Many rebelled. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem—with its sprawling empire-wide network of clergymen and endowments—invoked church canon to justify its rejection of the community's new regulations.⁶¹ The Catholicosate of Cilicia, like Aghtamar, continued to ordain and consecrate without Constantinople's consent. Others with pronounced ties to Armenian financial networks and Muslim notables, such as Boghos Melikian in Van and Harutiun Vehabedian in Erzurum, simply refused to convene constitutionally mandated councils or hold elections.⁶² In each case, clergymen rejecting the centralization programs of the constitution could rely on support from many among the lay Armenian elite, including the *amiras* in the capital, to shield them from consequences for disobeying orders. At first they succeeded; Jerusalem's invocation of an anathema delegitimized the canonical bases of Constantinople's claim to ecclesiastical authority. The reformers responded by tightening the language of the constitution, providing Constantinople with more authority, and building support in the provinces.

Shiroian understood the threat and that combatting the creeping authority of the patriarchate and Porte in 1864 would require more dramatic measures than those he had employed in 1858. The practice of electing prelates transformed the scope of lay participation in Armenian Church administration—by transferring that role from the *amiras* to the guilds and others—as it recruited the masses into the project of state centralization and tasked them with removing their own ecclesiastical institutions from the networks of power in which they were ensconced. Provincial Armenians had recourse to the articles of the constitution to make legitimate claims on the state's coercive capacity to challenge their own clergy and, by extension, regional power brokers. Petitions directed to the Patriarchate of Constantinople—overseen by lay Armenian employees of the Sublime Porte—frequently reached the Sublime Porte, which could then issue orders to (or against) provincial governors. This was the most crucial change of all. The state had long partnered with the community elite to manage the empire in the context of its confessionalized politics; the introduction of the state into the day-to-day regulation of communal affairs anointed different classes of Armenians as partners in empire.

Toward the end of the Confessional Order: Ottomanism and Centralization

Significant challenges awaited the reformers tasked with transforming the community's relationship with the state. Simply assigning non-elite Armenians a role in the project of

⁵⁹ See articles 94–98 of the 1863 Armenian National Constitution, *Azgayin Sahmanadrutium Hayots* (Constantinople, 1863), 52–53.

⁶⁰ See 1863 Constitution, article 46, 30–32.

⁶¹ Jerusalem's rebellion set in motion events that led to the initial suspension of the constitution in 1862. See Ormanean, *Azgapatum*, 2719–20. The fallout later spilled into the Armenian national assembly in Istanbul, where the Patriarch of Jerusalem was summoned to explain his refusal to abide by reform programs authored in the capital.

⁶² Tevkants narrates such episodes throughout *Chanabarhordutyun*.

state centralization and placing administrative tools in their hands did not necessarily make them active participants in reform. Although many provincial Armenians well understood the potential benefits of reform, reactionaries opposed to any type of communal reorganization employed violence to deter the reformers' efforts. The ferocity of the reaction caught many Istanbul-based Armenian statesmen off guard, leaving clergymen dispatched to the provinces to develop their own strategies of action. Access to local knowledge frequently dictated success, as the divergent experiences of two clergymen dispatched to Van in 1858 illustrate. The first, Iknadios Kakmajian, an Istanbul native held in high regard by the Porte's Armenian bureaucrats, was appointed prelate. The naivete and condescension that permeated his correspondence with church authorities in the capital evinced an empire-wide paternalism, shared by high-ranking bureaucrats and functionaries that cut across ethnoreligious lines.⁶³ Reactionaries in Van and elsewhere quickly learned to exploit his prejudices and assumptions to their advantage. Kakmajian fell for them repeatedly, most apparently in his reports on the murder of Bedros Bübül that in fact blamed the victim.⁶⁴

The second clergyman presented the reactionaries with a very different set of challenges. Mkrtich Khrimian would go on to have perhaps the most consequential career of any Armenian clergyman in the 19th century, eventually winning election as Patriarch of Constantinople and later Catholicos of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin. In the late 1850s he was an upstart celibate priest who, like Kakmajian, understood the culture of the Armenian Church and enjoyed the support of Armenians in the employ of the Sublime Porte. Unlike Kakmajian, Khrimian originally hailed from Van and was versed in the semiotics of provincial culture and politics. Committed to centralization yet unencumbered by Kakmajian's parochialism, Khrimian intuitively grasped how the Apostolic Armenian communities of the provinces operated as local and imperial regimes of power in the context of a confessionalized politics. For Kakmajian, as it was for many other officials across the empire, reform was a civilizing mission wherein center and periphery were object formations, with the former morally obligated with correcting the latter. Khrimian did not reject the logic of a civilizing mission outright, but he did nuance center and periphery as contingent categories that reformers had to substantiate through social and cultural action.⁶⁵

For Khrimian and others, these experiences with centralization shaped their understandings of what is now referred to as Ottomanism. The idea of Ottomanism—along with its attendant promises of equality and inclusion—is typically presented as an ideology developed through the writing of the Young Ottomans.⁶⁶ What if any direct engagement Armenians might have had with Young Ottoman thought remains unclear. Otherwise illusory concepts such as inclusion and equality did however filter into the Armenian worldview through centralization and its presumption of a (new) normative order. Yet these still could not be decoupled from a politics organized by confessionalization, which arguably mediated Armenian political thought until the empire's collapse. Khrimian and his allies therefore developed a repertoire that brought together cultural material familiar to both them and members of their community—imperial ideology (centralization) and legitimacy structures, the entwined semiotics of religious politics (and its ecclesiastical and liturgical expressions) and provincial culture—which they could then use to situate Istanbul and the Ottoman state at the forefront of Armenian social and political imaginaries. Religion necessarily remained the most significant of these cultural materials.

⁶³ On Ottoman paternalism, see Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 768–96. For Kakmajian's correspondence with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, see BNU CGPR XIX 81.

⁶⁴ BNU CGPR XIX 81, particularly letters dated 15 January 1865 and 14 November 1865.

⁶⁵ "Progress" (*harajadimutian*) figured at the center of Khrimian's provincial programs. See Dzovinar Derderian, "Shaping Subjectivities and Contesting Power through the Image of the Kurds, 1860s," in *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century: Societies, Identities, and Politics*, ed. Dzovinar Derderian et al. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 96–100.

⁶⁶ On the Young Ottomans, see Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962).

The semiotics of Ottoman politics saturated Armenian religious practice. The holy liturgy recited every Sunday explicitly legitimated the sultan, his government, and the hierarchies it enshrined. Through invocations of temporal and spiritual authority, the holy sacraments and the textual artifacts they produced reinscribed Ottoman subjectivity. The convergence of ecclesiastical and political power extended to the clergy, where a complex system of fraternal relationships established authority, circumscribed action, and reproduced hierarchy. Clergymen oftentimes belonged to “families,” or cliques, that vied with one another for influence.⁶⁷ The pressures exerted by these forces dissuaded clergymen who might otherwise make common cause with community members opposed to the status quo. Acquiescence to clerical norms was a prerequisite for enjoying access to the relationships with elites and government officials brokered by the church; deviation from those norms could sever clergymen’s pathways to power and, as the case of Bedros Bülbül showed, even place their lives in jeopardy. Clerical discipline was critical to the maintenance of networks into which Armenian institutions had been integrated.

Although he came to the clergy later in life, Khrimian understood these codes and their disciplinary force. That did not prevent him from flouting them, as he frequently invoked his relationship with the state to justify his transgressions against accepted custom. Upon his return to Van, for example, Khrimian made public displays of his orders—endorsed by the Sublime Porte—on multiple occasions both to overcome resistance to his appointments as well as to demonstrate his (and, by extension, the reformers’) alliance with the imperial state.⁶⁸ Boldly, Khrimian even took to the pulpit and broke publicly with the bishop who had ordained him—his spiritual father, the man typically responsible for mediating access to relationships of power—announcing that central Church authorities would be investigating the older clergyman’s actions. Later, as head of the provincial prelacy based in Mush, Khrimian won the epithet *hayrik*, or “papa,” by using his connections with the central government to compel the regional governor to intervene on behalf of Armenians subject to various forms of oppression by their Muslim neighbors.

This was critical for Khrimian’s success, as manipulation of a familiar cultural field made it possible to activate sites and symbols of Ottoman Armenian power to demonstrate the changing contours of the community’s partnership with the state in the context of a confessionalized order. Ottomanism and the Tanzimat had, from the perspective of Armenian reformers, merely shifted the locus of the community-state partnership from elites and conservative clergymen to reformers and their allies. Armenian reformers were, Khrimian and others reasoned, simply extending this partnership to pave a pathway to more meaningful inclusion in the Ottoman polity. The community’s end of the bargain—enforcement of ecclesiastical boundaries—remained largely unchanged and so left the scope of their politics fixed in a confessionalized framework, where battles for control of religious institutions dictated community access to social and political power. To this end, the reformers won the banishment of several clergymen responsible for propping up the networks of power targeted by imperial centralization policies. Armenian implementation of a more sophisticated ecclesiastical administration was in fact contributing to the very transformation of both the empire’s administration and its social organization.

That transformation, which would make a new kind of politics in Ottoman space possible, ultimately contributed to the failure of Ottomanism. Ottomanism failed not when non-Muslims embraced nationalism, but instead when the repertoires of action developed by Khrimian and his allies could no longer chart pathways to power or inclusion. The successful removal of reactionary priests from positions of power, which Armenian reformers realized with backing from the Sublime Porte, lent legitimacy to the Armenian view that

⁶⁷ On this discussion, see Richard Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 49–67.

⁶⁸ “Matenadaran MS 4180,” (tract), Mesrop Mashtots Matenadaran (Yerevan, Armenia), 94. This tract, authored by Tevkants, was likely composed at some point in the 1870s.

state and community were working together to dislodge all opponents—Muslim and Armenian—of centralization policies. For the reformers, this also justified their belief that they shared in imperial sovereignty and were therefore entitled to make claims on the state's coercive capacity to counter the violence marshalled by reactionary clergymen's allies, regional Muslim elites, and provincial officials, to enforce a status quo. Armenian reformers accordingly submitted a report to the Sublime Porte, drafted and revised in the early years of the 1870s, that explicitly called on the imperial government to make its presence felt in the provinces by establishing more military bases and increasing the number of police (whose number were to include Armenians among their ranks).⁶⁹ The language of the report carefully juxtaposed Armenian loyalty to the state and its laws (with a special plea that the Ottoman legal code be translated into Armenian so that Armenians could defend their rights) with the rebellious nature of the nomadic peoples at the edges of the empire who disrespected the Tanzimat and, by extension, the sultanate.

Disappointment awaited the reformers. The report itself highlighted numerous examples of the government's failure to address Armenian suffering at the hands of their Muslim neighbors. For a battery of reasons—disinterest, inability, or political expediency—the Ottoman state made little effort to curtail abuse of Armenians or otherwise address the widening chasm between them and Ottoman Muslims. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 and the Shaykh Ubeidullah Rebellion (1880–81) that grew out of it further exacerbated those relationships. Ottoman irregulars, mostly Kurds fleeing the Caucasus front, targeted Ottoman Armenian settlements in the course of their retreat; most notable was the massacre of Armenians at Bayazid by Kurds before Russian armies took the town.⁷⁰ Following the uprisings, Kurdish rebels responsible for violence against Armenian life and property were offered pathways back into the imperial fold in the form of pardons, medals, and positions. Armenian reformers—erstwhile partners of the state, or so they thought—would have the opposite experience.

Returning to his native Van as prelate in 1880, Khrimian attempted to employ the strategies of action he had spent the previous decades developing in the hopes of salvaging the state-community partnership and establishing a pathway to power for his flock. He instead encountered numerous obstacles. Most debilitating was the state's order, issued in 1881, that forbade Armenians from using their church or its institutions to make political claims.⁷¹ This of course ran counter to the very logic of Ottoman imperialism and non-Muslim subjectivity. The government consequently grew suspicious of the Armenian reformers, especially the clergy, who interrogated an emergent status quo from which they were being excluded. Several ended up in prisons. Khrimian himself would be sent off to internal exile in 1885. Before departing, a desperate Khrimian made a final gamble. Realizing that Ottomanism could no longer chart a path to power, he convinced the community to reinstate his clerical opponents—those who had allied with Muslim notables—to leadership positions in the Armenian Church, hoping that they would be able to stanch the bleeding and restore some kind of protection to provincial Armenians.

They would prove largely unable to do so. Violence against Armenians not only grew in scope and intensity, but enjoyed the state's tacit approval, as the Porte made abundantly clear in the case of Gülizar and Musa Bey.⁷² In 1889, Musa Bey, a brigand with a notorious reputation in Armenian circles, kidnapped and raped Gülizar, the fourteen-year-old granddaughter of an Armenian village headman who had filed complaints against him with the government. This episode, unlike similar acts of intimidation and retribution, garnered

⁶⁹ *Teghekgagir Gavaranak Harstaharuteants: Nekayatseal ar B. Dran Yanun Azgayin Zhoghovoy i 11 Aprili 1871* (Constantinople: Tpagrutium Aramean, 1876).

⁷⁰ C. B. Norman, *Armenia and the Campaign of 1877* (London: Cassell Peter and Galpin, 1878), 293–99.

⁷¹ British National Archives, Foreign Office 195/1376 No. 30 (27 June 1881).

⁷² For a recent analysis of Gülizar's story and its implications for social relations in the region, see Owen Miller, "Back to the Homeland' (*Tebi Yergir*): Or, How Peasants Became Revolutionaries in Muş," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 4, no. 2 (2017): 287–308.

international attention that placed tremendous diplomatic pressure on the government to bring Musa Bey to court. Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1908) had his justice minister, Cevdet Pasha, ensure Musa Bey's acquittal at trial; he was then returned to the provinces and his Armenian accusers were required to compensate him for his travel to the capital.⁷³ The messages were abundantly clear: Kurds and other Muslims, or those whom Khrimian had framed as the enemy of a centralizing Ottoman state, had carte blanche to oppress Armenians. Armenians, already denied the right to use their church for political purposes, had no avenues to power. Centralization had produced exclusion.

Conclusion: The Confessional Order Unraveled

The reorganization of the empire and its subsequent centralization (supported as it was by Ottomanism) in this way fully unmade the confessionalized politics that had informed imperial governance for much of the previous two centuries. This wholesale rewriting of a politics of religious difference created new possibilities for political and social organization that ranged from the ecumenical to the sectarian.⁷⁴ It also brought forth contradictions that would prove irreconcilable. The 1881 decision of the state to prohibit Armenians from using their church—the very institution they were reforming in service of state centralization—to make claims on the empire's politics, for example, confounded reformers who had understood such efforts as a pathway to inclusion and political power. This was however only one part of a broader effort by the state to either control or remove religious institutions from the political process, including those of Muslims. The similarities stopped there. For Armenians, the processes that unmade the confessionalized order concluded their partnership with the state and stripped them of the only real institutional mechanisms they used to participate in imperial governance, which were then never replaced. Meanwhile Muslims, as the case of Musa Bey demonstrates, continued to wield social and political power that was not dependent on religious institutions. Paradoxically, these early Ottoman forays into secularization laid the foundations for a politics of Muslim solidarity that underwrote the regime of Abdülhamid II and fashioned a Muslim political community that the Unionists would later claim as their constituency.⁷⁵

Khachatur Shiroian's tenure as Catholicos of Aghtamar (r. 1864–95) dramatically captures these dynamics. Like previous catholicos of Aghtamar, Shiroian owed his position to an alliance with Kurdish emirs; it was, as noted earlier, in collaboration with the family of Khan Mahmud that Shiroian had organized the murder of his predecessor in 1864 to undermine the Patriarchate of Constantinople. But by the end of his term in 1895 (shortly before he passed away), he desperately sought Constantinople's support as Kurds massacred, pillaged, and forcibly converted Armenians throughout Anatolia, including in the dioceses of Aghtamar. These Kurds were strangers to Shiroian and many Armenians in the region. The dissolution of social formations under the weight of centralization and the pressures it unleashed vaulted new political elites to the fore across the empire, most if not all Muslims. Among the Kurds in particular, these pressures were felt most acutely as the emirates gave way to tribes as the primary unit of political organization.⁷⁶ Tribal leaders, who stepped into their roles as communal reform was ripping Armenian institutions from sites of social power, had neither the means, the know-how, nor the incentive to engage with Armenians politically. The tribes instead engaged directly with the government,

⁷³ On Musa Bey, see Musa Şaşmaz, ed., *Kürt Musa Bey Olayı* (Istanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2004).

⁷⁴ Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

⁷⁵ On the formation of a new Muslim political community, see Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); and Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷⁶ Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 49–52.

which in turn utilized different methods for integrating them into a newly reconfigured polity.

Narratives of late Ottoman secularization tend to miss a crucial point: the efforts to decouple religion from official governance in fact strengthened both an increasingly authoritarian state and a Muslim political identity. Although the end of a confessionalized order and its politics of religious difference did push Islam to the sidelines in official governance, it did nothing to address the structural chasms produced by centuries of discrimination, and instead exacerbated the cleavages that separated communities from one another. When sovereignty was no longer shared with non-Muslims, effective political power shifted dramatically in favor of Muslim elites such as Kurdish tribal leaders who now interacted directly with the state without having to negotiate non-Muslim mediation. This in turn facilitated a Muslim identity politics that coalesced during the Hamidian period. State and sultanlic patronage of Islamic shrines, the construction of mosques, and a new emphasis on the symbolism of the caliphate legitimated the new political order; opportunities available only to Muslims, such as marriage ties, Naqshbandi-Khalidi connections, and the establishment of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, ensured its institutional manifestation in both the capital and the provinces.⁷⁷ These new arrangements barred Armenians from participation in the political process, denied them any means for engaging with it, and treated any protest of the emergent status quo as sedition.

So Shiroian watched helplessly as Kurdish tribesmen, many of them integrated into the Hamidiye corps, massacred Armenians and plundered their property. His report on the massacres to the Patriarch of Constantinople, dated 19 December 1895 (three days before he passed away), details the perpetrators and the acts of violence they committed.⁷⁸ The fate of clergymen and church properties, per Shiroian's description, reveals the extent to which his influence had waned as a result of communal reform and the restructuring of the empire. Priests, deacons, abbots, monasteries, and churches, or the entirety of Shiroian's administrative purview, to say nothing of his flock, once benefited from the putative protection he could offer through his relationships with various Kurdish power brokers. This time, representatives of the Armenian Church were singled out for special abuse. Some priests were dismembered alive others while were compelled to convert to Islam and marry multiple wives on the spot; either method left Armenians' traditional leadership and authority structures in a shambles. Churches were looted, destroyed, or, notably, converted to mosques.⁷⁹

Here, Shiroian's final missive ironically substantiates the argument articulated decades earlier by his accuser, Hovsep. Because he understood that confessionalization had assigned the Armenian Church a pivotal role in the formation of the imperial polity, Hovsep could argue that the state pursued its centralization policies in Kurdistan through Armenian ecclesiastical institutions. And the state did as much—not as the new phase of a partnership with the community, but because centralization required the unmaking of confessionalization to

⁷⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds and Islam," Working Paper no. 13 (Tokyo: Islamic Area Studies Project, 1999), 14–16; Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 52–94. Naqshbandi-Khalidis, who spread throughout the Kurdish periphery in the 19th century, were well positioned to connect Kurdish elites with power brokers in Istanbul, where the order had grown in prominence among state officials. Butrus Abu-Manneh, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century (1826–1876)* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2001), 13–71.

⁷⁸ Krikor Guergerian Archive 04/01, "Khachatur Katoghikosi Teghekagir" (19 December 1895). For an analysis and translation of the report, see Emre Can Dağlioğlu, "In the Wake of the Aghtamar Catholicosate's Demise: The Report on the 1895 Van Massacre by the Last Aghtamar Catholicos, Khachadour II," in *Armenians and Kurds in the Late Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ümit Kürt and Ara Sarafian (Fresno, CA: Press at California State University Fresno, 2020), 71–94. Dağlioğlu's analysis, framing, and argumentation borrow liberally from my own on the subject; see Richard Antaramian, "In Subversive Service of the Sublime State: Armenians and Ottoman State Power, 1844–1896" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2014).

⁷⁹ Krikor Guergerian Archive 04/01, 2–6.

establish a new political order. Shiroian's description of Armenian churches—looted, destroyed, or, most significantly, converted to mosques—narrates the death of confessionalism as it captures the shape that new order was to take. The end of a politics of religious difference meant that Armenian institutions—for so long the vehicle that ensured Armenians shared in imperial sovereignty—no longer had a role to play in governance, and whatever power they once possessed now transferred to the state's new Muslim partners.

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