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Comparing Empires

Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century

Edited by
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Commentary

Challenging Religion's Supranational Character in a Period of International Competition

Whether pagan, Christian or Muslim, since the days of Darius the Great monarchs have been bent on ruling 'by the grace of God'. However, the idea of such an intimate relationship between faith and power has also been resisted from very early on. The situation became more critical during the long nineteenth century, when societies went through profound economic, social, and cultural changes. Multi-confessional empires such as the ones under consideration in this volume began to experience religion both as an integrative force and as a divisive factor, depending on the circumstances. This necessitated shifts in state policies towards religion, which in some cases resulted in recognition of communal autonomy or other forms of accommodating cultural differences.

Historical research has rightly questioned the conventional wisdom, which tends to see, for example, the Habsburg Monarchy as, above all, a Catholic state, thereby neglecting multifaceted struggles between the church, the emperor, and the bureaucracy over such issues as tolerance toward non-Catholic Christians, Jewish emancipation, liberalism, or ultramontanism. The notion of Russian rule as theocracy, with the tsar as the defender of Orthodoxy, has survived well into the twentieth century. In the case of the Ottoman state, the dominant perception is similar: It is usually represented as an empire established around the idea of holy war, with a sultan as absolute ruler entrusted with upholding the supremacy of Islam over other religions. As for Great Britain, economically the most developed society of Europe and politically a stronghold of liberalism, its imperial expansion in the course of the nineteenth century has often been ascribed to the influence of the Anglican Church and the missionary enterprise sponsored by it.

The four contributions of this section address related questions and offer fresh insights into the complex history of religion and creed as a means of imperial legitimization. Martin Schulze Wessel focuses on the political role of religion in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Russian Empire, while Joa-

chim von Puttkamer discusses the development of modern schooling and education from the viewpoint of their contribution to political integration processes in these empires.

Obviously, both Russia and Habsburg rose to imperial greatness in the wake of successful 'crusades' against external as well as internal religious threats. The claim to the Byzantine heritage, articulated through the designation of Moscow as the 'Third Rome', transformed the Muscovite principality into a state with a religious mission. On the one hand, it was directly involved in the embittered conflict between renovationists and traditionalists within the Orthodox Church and, thus, gained an increasingly religious profile. On the other hand, it had to fend off the threat of Catholic domination. Thus, the liberation of Moscow from Polish occupation in 1613 was perceived as a victory over the enemy of Orthodoxy. A similar constellation in the case of the Habsburg Monarchy led to similar results: not only the struggle against the internal enemy, Protestantism, but also the one against the external enemy, the Muslim Turks, provided the monarchy with a distinctly religious aura.

Against this background the reforms of Peter I of Russia and Joseph II of Austria in the eighteenth century take on a particular significance. In both empires religion began to be viewed from the perspective of its utility for absolutist rule, and especially in Russia the church became virtually an integral part of the administration. In this context Peter's recognition of the privileged status of the Baltic German landowners and townsmen, as well as of the Lutheran Church in the recently conquered Baltic provinces, reflected a pragmatic approach, as much as its rescindment in the name of administrative standardization by Catherine II later in the century. It is important to keep in mind that the treatment of 'nationalities' in the western fringes of the empire differed considerably from the policies implemented in the eastern and south-eastern periphery, where the imperial government often acted in the spirit of a *mission civilisatrice* and, hence, with assimilationist purposes. By the early 1770s, however, the Russian empress found it expedient to grant communal rights to both Jews and Muslims. In the case of Habsburg, too, the bestowal of cultural or territorial autonomy, for example to Orthodox Serbs and Vlachs within the military frontier, or of some civic rights to Jews and Gypsies, primarily served the purposes of imperial integration and administrative rationalization. As such, they were perceived both by the Catholic Church and the nobility as infringements of the traditional order.

The fundamental change brought about by the French Revolution, culminating in the wide-spread acceptance of some novel ideas such as popular sovereignty and civic equality, confronted the multi-religious empires of the continent with a serious challenge. Since both Russia and Austria continued to rely on autocratic forms of government, the need for religious legitimiz-

ation was felt more urgently than ever. This resulted not only in the formation of the Holy Alliance in 1815 as a union of conservative monarchs who already regarded themselves 'as members of one and the same Christian nation', but partly also in the renouncement of the rationality so characteristic of the previous century. The fact that Russia thwarted Ottoman participation in the Congress of Vienna and, later on, contributed considerably to the suppression of Southern European revolutionary movements in the name of monarchic legitimacy, while readily relinquishing this principle in the case of an uprising against the sultan in Orthodox Greece, goes a long way to substantiate the growing weight religion had already attained in the empire. After the experience of the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the reforms of the 1860s, Russian society came under the growing influence of liberal, populist, socialist, and even anarchist streams of thought. Correspondingly, the state and the Orthodox Church intensified their cooperation, the latter becoming a more and more privileged institution, providing counsel at the highest level.

The turning point in the Habsburg Monarchy was marked by the revolutions of 1848–1849. The monarchy saw itself severely challenged by separatist movements that, in the meantime, had acquired new content. Whereas the old elites had expressed their claims in historical–territorial terms, the emergent social groups formulated demands of a communal character. Especially the Slavs and Romanians, until then largely disenfranchised as regards collective rights, began to emphasize linguistic, religious, and other forms of cultural identity. This trend was reflected in the draft Constitution of Kremsier (1849), which elevated the equality of nationalities to the supreme principle. The forces involved in the subsequent restoration of the absolutist monarchy seemed prudent enough to recognize that the principle of national equality could become an effective weapon in the hands of an imperial authority to strike back at its particularistic opponents, especially those in Hungary. Specifically, the government of Felix Schwarzenberg insisted on the imperial policy that each national group should be treated equally and should have an equal opportunity to develop its language and culture. However, as aptly shown in the article by Joachim von Puttkamer, imperial support for initiatives that aimed at education in local languages "rather turned the social project of schools into the project of national equality and emancipation," thus intensifying the national question in the Monarchy.

In Imperial Russia, by contrast, the government stood aloof from education, leaving the initiative to civil society. This resulted in a confessional pluralism that seems to have also favoured the interests of non-Christian, mainly Jewish and Muslim, groups. While the imperial government remained passive, competing civic initiatives provided for a remarkable up-

surge in schooling. Joachim von Puttkamer concludes that education "had the potential to support imperial integration, provided that it took account of ethnic and confessional diversity." However, in the case of Muslim groups in the late nineteenth century, integration through school education in different languages and the movement for cultural reform (*jadidism*) soon gained political impetus, thus confronting the imperial system with new challenges.

Azmi Özcan's article on the Ottoman caliphate provides valuable comparative clues in this connection. First of all, it is striking to learn that sultan-caliphs did not claim to rule by divine grace; differing from Christian emperors, they justified their rule on practical grounds, for instance by the fact that they secured the routes to the holy places of Islam, Mecca, and Medina, and that they acted as protectors of those places. Furthermore, a transfer of the caliphate from the last Abbasid incumbent of the office to Sultan Selim I apparently never took place; the dubious character of Ottoman sources purportedly supporting such a tradition has been recognized by serious scholarship. Third, and most significantly, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca at the end of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774 can be regarded as a watershed that marked the beginning of an active propagation of the Ottoman caliphate. In this document, which was of international legal significance, the sultan's claim to religious jurisdiction over the Muslims outside his realm was formally documented for the first time. The fact that the tsar could infer a right to act as protector of Ottoman Christians (Roderic H. Davison), leads directly into the intricacies of the Eastern Question. Similar to the Austrian and Russian cases, it can be argued that in the Ottoman imperial context religion was viewed primarily as a means of generating political loyalty; Abdülhamid II, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, proved himself a master in this regard. The pan-Islamic feeling fostered by his government, not least through missionary activities in India or the Dutch Indies, produced a kind of proto-nationalism that challenged European and particularly British imperial interests in Egypt, among other places.

Benedikt Stuchtey's richly textured and multifaceted analysis of religion and missionary activity in the Victorian age addresses the same topic from a different perspective. Starting with a depiction of the evangelical revival from the 1790s on and its ramifications within the British Empire in the course of the nineteenth century, the article brings into focus not only the relationship between trade and Christian missions, but also Evangelicalism's contribution to the formation of a public discourse at home on class, race, and equality. It becomes understandable how the missionary enthusiasm of men and women from diverse geographic, ethnic, and confessional backgrounds could furnish a theological justification for imperialism. But it be-

comes also understandable how the 'civilizing mission', with its multilayered commitments to local society, generated opposition to colonial rule in the long term. Moreover, interest in natural theology combined with evolutionary biology – intellectual pursuits *en vogue* during the period – proved conducive to the formation of a critical awareness that began to question the moral legitimacy of Western societies' rule over indigenous peoples.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, all these factors led to an estrangement between Christian missions and imperial rule. Mission, originally a transnational activity within a global network, had by then been reduced to a mere linkage between metropolis and colony. Instead of supranationality, the principle of the nation-state had become supreme, restricting the space within which religious freedom could assert itself. And at the beginning of the twentieth century, the justification of imperial expansion, "namely its civilizing mission ... was superseded by an ideology of racial distinctiveness."

In all four articles, disillusionment appears the inevitable lot of the relationship between empire and religion. The Church of England had lost much of its influence on social, cultural, and religious life by the 1870s, while the imperial government, preoccupied with urgent issues such as Home Rule for Ireland, was obliged to heed Catholic opinion as well and, hence, was hardly able to uphold the Church's privileged position. As society became rather materialist in outlook, interest in the missionary venture, too, diminished considerably. Even in missionary circles, meagre results in the field of conversion led to widespread pessimism. Consequently, there was a clear tendency to dissociate oneself from colonial rule, and by the outbreak of the Great War many missionaries held anti-imperialist views (Andrew Porter).

Growing indifference to the state religion (Catholicism) seems to have also been a noticeable trend in the contemporary Habsburg Monarchy. Here it was not religious diversity, but a specific form of linguistic nationalism that proved to be the main threat to imperial unity. In contrast, from the 1880s on Tsarist Russia propagated the anachronistic concept of the 'unity of empire and religion', despite the fact that religious diversity within the empire was clearly on the rise. Such contradictions were not unknown in the Ottoman case either. Whereas Abdülhamid II used Islam and the caliphate as instruments of political integration, the Young Ottomans' constitutionalist drive and the Young Turks' positivist world-view were bound to undermine the position of Islam in state and society. In the Balkan War of 1912 the Ottoman army did not fight for religion, nor for a national cause, but in defence of the constitution. However, it entered the Great War with a declaration of jihad, to be followed by pan-Turkist proclamations and finally, inspired by Darwinist concepts, a policy of ethno-religious homogenization.