



Multicultural Islam in the Ottoman Turkish Civilization during the Medieval Era

The objective of this study is to explore the Ottoman Empire's management model in navigating a diverse, multiethnic, and multireligious society, thereby fostering an advanced and dynamic civilization. Employing a qualitative approach with a content analysis model during data interpretation, this research identifies a synergistic alignment between the open policy and the empire's response to ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. This alignment stems from the extensive conquest process and the organic awareness within the community, influencing social interactions. The open policy, characterized by the establishment of local entities such as readers, *millet*s, *reāyā*, *sipāhis*, and *timars*, facilitates the accommodation of diverse interests, worship practices, and cultural expressions. This policy is instrumental in supporting a society's multicultural awareness, fostering openness to cultural assimilation, and promoting respect for religious practices. Notably, Islam is positioned as a safeguard to ensure the enforcement of power supremacy as outlined in The Ottoman code, but the state largely refrains from intervening in religious activities and cultural expressions unless there is a clear threat to its authority. This awareness of distinct private and public spheres fosters a pluralistic and multicultural reality within Ottoman society, with the state adopting a relatively moderate position.

Keywords: Islamic Society, Multiculturalism, Religious Diversity

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menemukan model pengelolaan kekaisaran Ottoman dalam menghadapi masyarakat yang multietnis, dan multireligion, sehingga membentuk satu peradaban yang maju dan dinamis. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan model content analysis dalam proses pembacaan data. Penelitian ini menemukan relevansi sinergis dari keterbukaan kebijakan yang diterapkan dalam menanggapi perbedaan etnis, budaya, dan agama sebagai dampak dari proses penaklukan yang meluas dengan kesadaran organik masyarakat dalam melakukan intraksi sosialnya. Sifat terbuka kebijakan yang ditandai dengan pembentukan pimpinan lokal, *millet*, *reāyā*, *sipāhis*, dan *timar* secara signifikan berkontribusi untuk menakomodir perbedaan kepentingan, praktik ibadah, dan ekspresi kebudayaan. Kebijakan ini juga terbukti mendukung kesadaran multicultural masyarakat yang terbuka dalam proses asimilasi budaya dan penghargaan terhadap praktik keagamaan. Islam diposisikan sebagai pelindung untuk menjamin penegakan atas supremasi kekuasaan yang termanifestasi dalam The Ottoman code. Negara tidak terlibat dalam pengaturan aktivitas keagamaan dan ekspresi kebudayaan selama tidak ada upaya untuk pemberontakan. Kesadaran atas wilayah privat dan publik menjadikan realitas multikultural di masyarakat Ottoman bersifat pluralistik dengan posisi negara yang moderat.

Kata Kunci: Masyarakat Islam, Multiculturalism, Keragaman Beragama

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Dates:

Received 23 Dec 2022
Revised 26 May 2023
Accepted 20 Jul 2023
Published 1 Sept 2023

How to cite this article:

Abdurahman, Dudung, Siti Maemunah, Sukron Ma'mun and Soraya Adnani. "Multicultural Islam in the Ottoman Turkish Civilization during the Medieval Era". *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 24 (2). <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v24i2.4823>

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Introduction

The impact of Ottoman imperial rule, spanning six centuries and encompassing a culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse population, is often characterized by the perception that expansive policies¹ led to cruelty and backwardness². Despite these views, the Ottoman model of governance, in contrast to popular representations, exhibited a nuanced understanding of social, religious, and cultural dynamics. Recognizing and appreciating ethnic and religious diversity, the Ottoman Empire implemented a range of policies that left a lasting impact, influencing many other nations in subsequent periods. The intricate relationship between the state, local leaders, and multiethnic communities, woven through concepts like *reāyā*, *sipāhis*, and *timar*, serving as evidence of Ottoman rule's appreciation and respect for the values held by the conquered communities.³ In the realm of religion, the millet concept further exemplifies the Ottoman Empire's respect for religious differences, specifically referring to Islamic sharia.⁴ This approach, marked by moderation and pluralism, underscores the

Empire's strength in maintaining its power through societal stability.

Researchers have largely overlooked the connection between Ottoman state management policies and public awareness of religion and culture. Previous studies have predominantly focused on two key themes. The first concerns the historical development of power, as explored by Abd. Rahim Yunus⁵ and As'adurrofik⁶, who compared the Ottoman's rise to power with that of the Mamluk Dynasty in Egypt and the Safavid Dynasty in Persia. The emphasis of various scholars on power dynamics also implies the need to understand the evolving societal realities.⁷ The second concerns socio-religious interactions as a focal point, with Mujahidin delving into the impact of the crusades on the socio-religious dynamics of Ottoman society.⁸ Additional studies have examined socio-cultural dynamics, particularly concentrating on specific aspects like education⁹ and the administration of justice¹⁰. While Islam's fundamental role in the Ottoman Empire has attracted considerable attention from researchers due to its influence on state stability¹¹ and the recognition of various

¹ Leften S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1958), 101.

² Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 75.

³ Haul Inalcik, "The Ottoman Decline and Its Effects Upon the Reaya," in *Aspects of the Balkans: Continuity and Change*, ed. Henrik Birnbaum and Speros Vryonis (The Hague: Mouton & Co., Printers, 1972), 338–54, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110885934-017>; Leonid Żytkowicz, "Directions of Agrarian Development in South-Eastern Europe in 16th-18th Centuries," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 43 (1981): 31–73.

⁴ Bülent Şenay, "Communal Autonomy Of The Jewish 'Millet' In The Ottoman-Turkish Tradition," *Studia Hebraica*, no. 6 (2006): 75–86.

⁵ Abd Rahim Yunus and Abu Haif, *Sejarah Islam Pertengahan* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2013).

⁶ Muhammad As'adurrofik, "Sejarah Peradaban Islam Tiga Kerajaan Besar," *AL-Fathonah: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Keislaman* 1, no. 1 (2021): 188–209.

⁷ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Syafi A. Mughni, *Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam Di Turki* (Jakarta: Logos

Wacana Ilmu, 1997); Ajid Thohir, *Perkembangan Peradaban Di Kawasan Dunia Islam: Melacak Akar-Akar Sejarah, Sosial, dan Budaya Umat Islam* (Jakarta: PT. Raja Grafindo Persada, 2004); M. Abdul Karim, *Sejarah Pemikiran Dan Peradaban Islam* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Book Publisher, 2009); Badri Yatim, *Sejarah Peradaban Islam: Dirasah Islamiyah III* (Jakarta: PT. Raja Grafindo Persada, 1997).

⁸ Mujahidin Mujahidin, "Hubungan Sosial Budaya Islam Dan Kristen (Periode Pertengahan Dan Modern)," *AL MA'ARIEF: Jurnal Pendidikan Sosial Dan Budaya* 1, no. 1 (July 21, 2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.35905/almaarief.v1i1.779>.

⁹ Ismail K Usman, "Pendidikan Pada Tiga Kerajaan Besar (Kerajaan Turki Usmani, Safawiy di Persia dan Moghul di India)," *Jurnal Ilmiah Iqra'* 11, no. 1 (February 25, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.30984/jii.v11i1.577>.

¹⁰ M. A. Tihami, "Hüküm dan Peradilan Islam pada Masa Turki Usmani," *Al Qalam* 10, no. 50 (1994): 13–22, <https://doi.org/10.32678/ALQALAM.V10I50.1701>.

¹¹ Desi Syafriani and Doni Nofra, "Dakwah Di Turki Pada Masa Dinasti Utsmani," *FUADUNA: Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 2, no. 1 (August 22, 2019): 38, <https://doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna.v2i1.2025>; Mami Nofrianti and Kori Lilie Muslim, "Kemajuan Islam Pada Masa Kekaisaran Turki Utsmani," *FUADUNA: Jurnal Kajian*





religions¹², there's a tendency to overlook forms and models of societal interaction that do not solely emphasize private religious principles. The boundaries between religious, social, and cultural practices in both public and private spheres, supported by state policies, have been neglected in existing research.

This study aims to address limitations in prior research by investigating how state policies regulating multi-ethnic societies shape public awareness of diversity and plurality. Using two complementary models, this study first analyzes the diverse strategies employed by the Ottoman state to manage religious, ethnic, and cultural distinctions. This model serves as the foundation for the second model, which delves into two primary issues: the interaction among individuals of different religions and those of varying ethnicities and cultures. The examination of religious and cultural matters in this research seeks to understand Ottoman society's response to belief differences arising from the conquest process, uncovering the synergistic correlation that underlies the principles of multiculturalism within Ottoman civilization.

This research diverges from the assertion that managing a multiethnic society in a region emphasizing religious values in the regulatory process often leads to the adoption of specific religious principles as a standard response to differences. Such a model tends to steer policies towards a form of religious imposition susceptible to oppressive actions. Conversely, the Ottoman perspective, deemed indifferent to

religious matters in governance, is anticipated to yield secular policies.¹³ The secularization of multiethnic societal structures is likely to overlook religious perspectives, resulting in cultural and religious interactions being devoid of religious considerations.¹⁴ The enduring civilization spanning over six centuries does not support the application of two distinct approaches in regulating relations within a multiethnic community.

To validate the research argument, this study employs qualitative research methods utilizing literature-based data, considering the necessity for non-numerical measurements.¹⁵ Library research was selected, given that the data sources are derived from diverse literature discussing the various aspects of the Ottoman civilization. This study relies on a singular data source chosen through relevant snowballing techniques¹⁶. The collected data were then analyzed through a three-stage model:¹⁷ data reduction, data analysis, and conclusion drawing. The content analysis model was applied during data analysis, facilitating the organization of data through collection, mapping, and identifying relational connections to extract deeper meaning.¹⁸

Multiculturalism in Islamic perspective

Although acknowledging plurality (*at-ta'addudiyah*) and diversity (*at-tanawwu'*) as inherent to the natural order (*min sunan al-fitrah*), the notion of multiculturalism within Islam has

Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan 3, no. 1 (June 30, 2019): 22, <https://doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna.v3i1.1331>.

¹² Nurkholijah Siregar, "Pluralisme Agama Pada Masa Dinasti Turki Usmani Dan Relevansinya Dengan Kejayaan Islam," *Hikmah* 12, no. 1 (2015): 60–68.

¹³ Bhiku Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: McMillan, 2000), 198.

¹⁴ Tariq Modood, "Introduction: The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe," in *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe. Racism, Identity and Community*, ed. Tariq Modood and Pnina Werbner (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1997), 10.

¹⁵ Betina Hollstein and Nils C. Kumkar, "Qualitative Methods," in *Soziologie - Sociology in the German-Speaking World* (Leiden: De Gruyter, 2021), 301–14, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110627275-021>.

¹⁶ Jesse D. Lecy and Kate E. Beatty, "Representative Literature Reviews Using Constrained Snowball Sampling and Citation Network Analysis," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1992601>.

¹⁷ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis (a Source Book of New Methods)* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1984).

¹⁸ Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis: Guidebook* (California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017).





faced varying.¹⁹ Prophet Muhammad's teachings exemplified this ideology, advocating for the harmonious coexistence of diverse elements within a unified and peaceful community. This respect for varied religious practices was evident in early Islam, forming an integral part of religious diversity, as encapsulated in the Constitution of Medina (*ahd al-umma*).²⁰ This constitutional framework laid the groundwork for accommodating differences, after having successfully unified tribal diversity under the umbrella of monotheism.²¹ Prophet Muhammad's approach to regulating diverse aspects was perpetuated by his successors, the *al-khalafa' ar-rashidūn*,²² who assumed the responsibility of acknowledging and safeguarding religious communities in conquered regions through the payment of a pledge of allegiance (*ji'zayah*).²³ This practice persisted, anchoring the conception of human relations on religious values.

Plurality and diversity find unity in a shared essence that underscores the interconnectedness originating from the unity of creation. Within Islam, the acceptance of this diversity finds its root in the concept of *tawhid*.²⁴ This concept emphasizes the oneness of God as the creator of all, framing differences as entities emerging from the One. Recognizing this shared origin engenders a sense of respect for the dignity of all humans, expressed through diverse forms,

accompanied by a universal set of rules capable of accommodating diversity in ethnicities, cultures, and traditions. Universality ensures that plurality and diversity coexist with equal rights and positions. While differences are manifest in practice and implementation,²⁵ the encompassing rules binding diverse humans highlight the humanistic aspect.²⁶ All distinctions, regulations, and provisions are guided by a consideration of the capabilities and values inherent in the essence of humanity, viewed as representative of God on Earth (*khalifah fi al-ard*).

As representatives of God on Earth, humans hold an obligation to treat each other with equal respect and consideration. This shared responsibility involves fulfilling their duties to God according to diverse forms and practices aligned with their personal interpretations of divine principles. The concept of egalitarianism holds significance in navigating a pluralistic community.²⁷ The inherent plurality in creation permits diverse actions, some of which may be unequal and potentially lead to disapproval or disagreement. In such circumstances, Islam guides its followers to respond to differences with moderation, avoiding favoritism towards any particular stance.²⁸ This approach is anchored in four foundational unity, equality, human brotherhood, and compassion.

¹⁹ Muḥammad 'Imārah, *Al-Islām Wa Al-Ta'addudiyah: Al-Ikhtilāf Wa at-Tanawwū' Fi Itjār Al-Waḥdah* (Kairo: Maktabah asy-Syurūq ad-Dawliyah, 2008), 23.

²⁰ Michael Lecker, *Muslim, Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 35.

²¹ John L. Esposito, *Islam Dan Politik*, trans. M. Joesoef Sou'yb (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1990), 8.

²² Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 14–15.

²³ Joshua T. White and Niloufer Siddiqui, "Mawlana Mawdudi," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic and Politics*, ed. John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166.

²⁴ Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, Nur Hidayah Mohd Paudzi, and Abdul Nasser Sultan Mohsen Sallam, "Islamic Perspective on the Concepts of Interaction among Multicultural Society," *Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 23,

no. 2 (December 30, 2021): 249–74, <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol23no2.7>.

²⁵ Derya Iner and Mirela Cufurovic, "Moving beyond Binary Discourses: Islamic Universalism from an Islamic Revivalist Movement's Point of View," *Religions* 13, no. 9 (September 4, 2022): 821, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090821>.

²⁶ Vernon James Schubel, "Introduction: Teaching Humanity—Islam as a Humanistic Tradition," in *Teaching Humanity: An Alternative Introduction to Islam* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 1–37, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22362-4_1.

²⁷ Tariq Modood, "Multiculturalism as a New Form of Nationalism?," *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 2 (April 13, 2020): 308–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12571>.

²⁸ 'Imārah, *Al-Islām Wa Al-Ta'addudiyah: Al-Ikhtilāf Wa at-Tanawwū' Fi Itjār Al-Waḥdah*, 20.





The Ottoman Empire's Dedication to Freedom and Protection of Rights

Multiculturalism, denoting a society marked by cultural diversity encompassing ethnicity, religion, and race, is viewed positively within societal structures. According to Bhiku Parekh, multiculturalism is linked to the celebration of diversity, a concept introduced by Christian theologians as early as the 4th century AD. Over time, the term became entwined with politics, finding implementation in government policies. Will Kymlicka defines multiculturalism in the policy realm as a safeguard for civil rights, encompassing the recognition of political rights, protection of ethnic minorities, freedom of expression of identity, and preservation of diverse practices.²⁹ This multicultural policy model gained widespread recognition in the 20th century, acknowledging the right to cultural and religious diversity.³⁰ Rawls contends that the formulation of rules promoting multicultural aspects prioritizes the attainment of justice, irrespective of the political structure employed.³¹ The inclination to merely assess diversity as a factual occurrence neglects the institutionalized values embedded in policy.

The formulation of values embodying respect for diversity is evident in the actions carried out during the governance process. The Ottoman government's model of centralization signifies the safeguarding of the rights of various ethnic groups under its jurisdiction. Decentralization empowered local citizens of shared ethnicity. Local chieftains, along with overlords (*uc-emir*) and vassal lords (*bey*), were empowered, reflecting the protection afforded to

local rulers.³² This model extended to land management (*timar*) within the colony, allocated to peasants (*reāyā*) involved in the military, overseen by a *kādî* by referring to the *kānûn-i osmānî* (the Ottoman code).³³ To maximize the benefits of centralization, the Ottoman government established administrative arrangements during the conquest period, involving the military, involving *sancaks* (sub-provinces) governed by military leaders known as *sancak-begis* under the supervision of *beglerbegi*, who served as the provincial army commanders overseeing specialized border units.³⁴

The Ottomans generally avoided imposing their own religion, ethnicity, or identity on their diverse population. Unlike some empires, citizens were not compelled to convert to Islam. This inclusivity is evident in the involvement of the indigenous population, clergy, and local nobility in maintaining state order. For example, local soldiers, or Voyniks, were granted the authority to utilize a portion of tax-exempt state land, while the Vlack, a Christian nomadic tribe in Serbia, enjoyed certain tax exemptions due to their service in safeguarding borders and preventing robberies. Additionally, higher-ranking cavalymen, *sipāhis*, were exempted from feudal obligations through a system called *pronoia*, further demonstrating the flexibility within the system. Some were stationed in fortresses, referred to as *hisar-eri* or *kale-ert*, recruited from regions distant from the government center, such as the Balkans and Anatolia.³⁵ Despite the democratic model of governance, the Ottoman government retained

²⁹ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16.

³⁰ Ellie Vasta, "From Ethnic Minorities to Ethnic Majority Policy: Multiculturalism and the Shift to Assimilationism in the Netherlands," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 5 (September 2007): 713–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701491770>.

³¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

³² Halil İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire: Conquest, Organization, and Economy* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1978), 104.

³³ Halil İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600* (Quezon City: Phoenix, 2001), 20.

³⁴ Halil İnalçık, "The Ottoman State: Economy and Society, 1300-1600," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13.

³⁵ İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire: Conquest, Organization, and Economy*, 107.





adherence to Sharia rules in upholding its state supremacy and sovereignty.

Constraints on the state's supremacy were delineated by religious law (sharia), emphasizing practices centered around the public good. An illustrative event occurred during the era of Mehmed II, marked by the struggle for the territory of Constantinople. The Roman Empire, in control of Constantinople, faced a threat from Hungary, prompting Mehmed II to initiate an attack in response to the termination of the armistice. Initially seeking a peaceful acquisition of Constantinople,³⁶ Mehmed II's narrative shifted to the justification of religious law for conquest, framing it as a struggle against polytheism versus ahl al-kitab (Christians and Jews) who had been previously warned and resisted.³⁷ Sharia principles were also employed to safeguard the property of citizens in conquered areas, without imposing conversion to Islam. The concept of *zimmī*, along with the obligation to pay taxes (*jizyah*), was applied.³⁸ The Ottoman expansion focused on unifying territory based on national unity, representing a state structure constructed without a religious identity.

The Ottoman rule's approach to state management incorporated two key concepts: utilizing local strengths and fostering ethnic identity for regional governance, and recognizing and integrating diverse groups for stability. The first involved acknowledging the strengths of conquered regions and entrusting local leaders with some governance roles. This approach fostered loyalty to the state by nurturing ethnic pride. Secondly, political arrangements were grounded in the values of

diversity. Recognizing and uniting diverse ethnicities, religions, and local powers became a significant aspect of establishing a stable state. This process emerged from an awareness of differences, serving as the foundation for rule formulation. The delineation of boundaries, employed as parameters in managing societal diversity, often cited threats to the state's integrity as justification. Actions that posed no harm to Ottoman supremacy were typically safeguarded and secured, reflecting an awareness and acceptance of differences.

In a multi-ethnic society characterized by diverse loyalties, the effective exercise of power, grounded in an understanding of diversity, is optimized through the utilization of local leadership. The enhancement of tribal loyalties within a centralized framework not only bolsters state stability but also ensures the preservation of diversity.³⁹ Individuals raised under ethnic leadership tend to develop a strong sense of belonging, fostering a disposition towards loyalty that surpasses the efficacy of an operational power model.⁴⁰ The presence of diversity plays a pivotal role in mitigating the concentration of political power within a state.⁴¹ This fundamental concept is reflected in policies that empower local actors to fulfill their roles. However, the acknowledgment of diversity, which holds the potential to give rise to varied truth values aligned with ethnicity, culture, and ideology, is constrained by the application of the Ottoman code as a unifying principle.

The Ottoman Empire's success in managing a diverse society hinged on a unified legal framework embodied in the Ottoman principle. This principle aims to mitigate the impact of

³⁶ Halil İnalçık, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest," *Studia Islamica*, no. 2 (1954): 103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595144>.

³⁷ İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire: Conquest, Organization, and Economy*, 232.

³⁸ Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19.

³⁹ Berk Emek, "Nationalizing the Multi-Ethnic Borderlands: State Surveillance and Security Policies in

Interwar Turkey and Romania," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 22, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 545–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2047143>.

⁴⁰ Veena Kukreja, "Ethnic Diversity, Political Aspirations and State Response: A Case Study of Pakistan," *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 66, no. 1 (March 6, 2020): 28–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019556120906585>.

⁴¹ John E.E. Dalberg-Acton, "Nationality," in *The History of Freedom and Other Essays*, ed. John E.E. Dalberg-Acton (London: Macmillan, 1907), 289.





diverse truth values, fostering harmonization in a heterogeneous society.⁴² The Ottomans established the Ottoman Code as a fundamental framework that unified the multitude of rules stemming from ethnic and cultural diversity. This code, which centered around a singular principle related to security and the preservation of Ottoman's supremacy over all citizens and conquered territories, accommodates diverse ethnicities and cultures, along with their respective sets of rules.

Multiculturalism in Ottoman Civilization: Respect for Religious and Cultural Expressions

The concept of multiculturalism within the fabric of civilization is linked to the interactive process where various societal elements intertwine, giving rise to actions characterized by mutual respect. Tariq Modood describes multiculturalism in this context as a bidirectional integration process that underscores collaborative relationships among distinct groups integrated into a unified framework (pluralistic integration).⁴³ At its core, multiculturalism denotes cultural pluralism within a geographical area inhabited by individuals speaking different languages or having diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.⁴⁴ The administration of varied languages, ethnicities, and religions shapes a social reality that plays a role in the development of civilization in a given region.

This section explores evidence of how active collaboration and integration among diverse groups persisted in Ottoman society, contributing to its development as a prosperous and influential civilization. This segment will

examine two forms of evidence: religious interactions and cultural interactions.

a. Plurality in religious practices

The Ottoman Empire's extensive conquests resulted in religious and ethnic diversity. This diversity was well managed through policies that did not force conversion to Islam. Although relations between Islam and Christianity in the early Ottoman period had been strained due to the Crusades,⁴⁵ they found relative peace in their religious practices under Ottoman rule. Similarly, Sephardic Jews who had been isolated under the previous Mamluk regime received protection and control over their lands through the autonomy policy implemented by the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁶ This gave Christians and Jews under the Ottoman Empire considerable freedom to manage their communal affairs based on need, including repairing houses of worship that were destroyed by the previous regime and building new houses of worship.⁴⁷ The freedom that non-Islamic religions enjoyed showed the transformation of people's religious life under the protection of the Ottoman Empire.

Under Ottoman rule, diverse religious communities of diverse sects and varied traditions coexisted, fostering a unique space of multiculturalism. Historical records reveal that Christians, Jews, and Muslims often shared indistinguishable characteristics, be it in language, culture, or attire. Russell highlights the linguistic diversity among the 18th-century Jews of Aleppo, whose Arabic dialect differed from

⁴² Joëlle Affichard, Antoine Lyon-Caen, and Laurent Thévenot, "Legal Norms and Convention Theory: Justification, Evaluation, and Realization of Law," in *Handbook of Economics and Sociology of Conventions*, ed. Rainer Diaz-Bone and Guillemette de Larquier (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 1–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52130-1_52-1.

⁴³ Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ David Theo Goldberg, "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Goldberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1995), 1.

⁴⁵ Palmira J. Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2023), 96–98.

⁴⁷ Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*, 41.





their Christian and Muslim counterparts.⁴⁸ Distinctive dressing styles among Jews, Christians, and Muslims further confounded European visitors, making it challenging to discern their religious identity solely by appearance.⁴⁹ The Manorites, a Christian minority sect, opted for Arabic over the Syriac language,⁵⁰ and Christian Jacobites residing in Kurdish areas practicing sharia were exempt from Islamic legal obligations⁵¹. The Ottoman Muslim state and society's respect for other religious communities illustrates the efficacy of established regulatory patterns accommodating diverse religions.

Bayazid I initiated a policy of tolerating established religions by overlooking differences in doctrines. This approach was evident when Bayazid I incorporated Christian Ottoman soldiers in the siege of Constantinople,⁵² marking the groundwork for a more inclusive vision of multiculturalism within the Ottoman Empire. Building on this, Sultan Fatih Mehmed (1451-1481) institutionalized this practice by establishing religious institutions later known as millets in the 19th century as an attempt to translate the vision into effective regulation within the Ottoman Empire. Under this system, each religious group was overseen by a rabbi (*millet başı*) appointed by the sultan and residing in Istanbul. Religious leaders were granted the autonomy to manage the affairs of their respective communities.⁵³ Notably, this

freedom extended to missionary activities, permitted by the government as long as they did not disrupt the sultanate's integrity and power. Christian missionaries, exemplified by Roman Catholic pilgrims, operated within the Ottoman Empire under the protection of religious symbols.⁵⁴ Additionally, the Ottomans ensured the safeguarding of Christian holy places that gained status as pilgrimage destinations during their rule.

b. *Diversity in Cultural expression*

The swift cultural assimilation within the Ottoman Empire stemmed from the openness of social rules and institutions applied across various domains. A harmonious relationship between Islam and Christianity played a pivotal role in expediting this cultural assimilation.⁵⁵ As Leften S. Stavrianos articulated, the coexistence of Turkish Muslims and Christian communities in agricultural regions hastened the merging of traditions and social interactions. Stavrianos highlighted linguistic absorption, mutual assimilation in attire, and shared models of social interaction as clear indicators of this rapid cultural assimilation. The assimilation process is further facilitated by the concept of tolerance in social interaction. The Muslim community actively engages with and respects Christian traditions, participating in religious activities and, at times, even assuming the role of godparents for Christian children.⁵⁶ This assimilation

⁴⁸ Alexander Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo: Containing a Description of the City, and the Principal Natural Productions in Its Neighbourhood*, vol. 2 (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1794), 59–60.

⁴⁹ Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*, 43.

⁵⁰ Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2.

⁵¹ John Joseph, *Muslim-Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East: The Case of the Jacobites in an Age of Transition* (New York: SUNY Press, 1983), 22–24.

⁵² Linda T. Darling, "Reformulating the Gazi Narrative: When Was the Ottoman State A Gazi State?," *Turcica* 43 (2011): 13–53, <https://doi.org/10.2143/TURC.43.0.2174063>.

⁵³ Benjamin Braude, "Foundation Myths of the Millet System," in *Christians & Jews in The Ottoman Empire*, ed. Benjamin Braude (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 65.

⁵⁴ Daniel Goffman, "Ottoman Millets in the Early Seventeenth Century," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 11 (July 21, 1994): 135–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600001011>.

⁵⁵ Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453*, 101.

⁵⁶ Stavrianos, 101.





dynamic is also evident among the Maronites, who, while embracing Christianity, assimilate a significant portion of Arab-Muslim culture into their own.⁵⁷

In the realm of literature and art, the Ottoman Empire is renowned for its exquisite architecture and the creation of authentic and imaginative poetry. The incorporation of more geometric and floral sculptural embellishments inspired by Islam seamlessly merged with the ancient Roman style.⁵⁸ This assimilation process gained momentum following the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II (1451-1481), who implemented an inclusive policy in urban development.⁵⁹ Byzantine and Timurid symbols were utilized to adorn palaces, mosques, and various structures. In the legislative domain, Mehmed II adopted the Justinian Code and enlisted the services of Byzantine and Anatolian writers. Mehmed II also embraced a diverse array of artists and architects, including Italians, Greeks, and Persians, in the construction process. This inclusive approach resulted in the creative and beautiful acculturation of artistic elements.⁶⁰ Stavrianos corroborated this perspective, highlighting how Ottoman literature and art reflect the assimilation of Greek, Syrian, and Egyptian cultures.⁶¹ The amalgamation of artistic and literary elements from diverse cultures within its realm distinguishes the Ottoman Empire as possessing an authentic and culturally rich artistic and literary heritage.

The Ottoman Empire's artistic and literary richness stemmed not only from diverse influences but also from a deep societal appreciation for beauty. Literati in

the Ottoman Empire enjoyed a prestigious and esteemed status, with several sultans showcasing literary mastery through a legacy of numerous literary works.⁶² While the literary form incorporated aspects of Persian literature in tone, form, and sentiment,⁶³ this did not diminish the empire's commitment to cultural development. Literature, in fact, served as a tool to propagate the multicultural values embraced by the people. This commitment is evident in the emergence of epic narratives during the 14th and 15th centuries, featuring stories that promoted a spirit of tolerance. Epics such as *Danişmendname*, *Saltuknâme*, and *Book of Dede Korkut* portrayed heroic tales that exhibited empathy toward Christians, notably through the characterization of Sarı Saltık.⁶⁴

The inclination toward openly implemented policies carries significant implications for fostering sustainable practices within society, leading to the establishment of pluralistic social, cultural, and religious structures. The data reveals three discernible trends in the implementation of multiculturalism within the Ottoman Empire. Firstly, there is a notable emphasis on interfaith respect and religious tolerance. The people embraced religious diversity, including the various sects that emerged from military expansion, welcoming individuals of different religions and providing them with ample space to practice their faith. The government's endorsement of religious tolerance is evident through the establishment of specialized institutions, granting each religion the freedom to organize its activities. Secondly, there is a focus on cultural diversity and assimilation. The amalgamation of diverse

⁵⁷ Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*, 43.

⁵⁸ Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453*, 92.

⁵⁹ Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*, 43.

⁶⁰ Masters, 43.

⁶¹ Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453*, 91.

⁶² Stavrianos, 92.

⁶³ Stavrianos, 92.

⁶⁴ Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State*, 149; Selim Deringil, *The Ottomans, the Turks and World Power Politics: A Historical Dictionary of Titles and Terms in Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2010), 113.





ethnicities under a unified leadership has had a profound impact on cultural and linguistic diversity, presenting significant potential for assimilation and cultural exchange. This dynamic has contributed to the evolution of a distinctive, authentic, and creatively innovative new culture.

The inclination to tolerate religious differences reflects that the Ottoman Empire did not impose any specific religious rules on religious activities, which significantly created an environment preventing from exploitation of minorities.⁶⁵ Similarly, the community's emphasis on the distinction between private and public affairs in religious practices has contributed to normalizing respect for the worship practices of each religion within society. This underscores that Ottoman society, right from its inception, embraced a multicultural attitude towards religion. According to Tuula Sakaranaho, this respect for religious diversity is linked to how religious communities in Ottoman society understood the boundaries between private and public life.⁶⁶ Understanding these boundaries can enhance awareness of the variations in religiosity specific to certain times, places, and social actors.⁶⁷ Failing to recognize this internal diversity fuels the formation of stereotypes, disrupting heterogeneous societal interactions.

The governance of a diverse society like the Ottoman Empire, marked by respect for religion and cultural assimilation, signifies the application of moderate and democratic values within a monarchy. Such moderate inclinations emerged from respecting religious differences, fostering tolerance among its people. Despite its Islamic legal foundation, the Empire was not purely secular or blindly pursued a singular religious truth,⁶⁸ as it avoided imposing religious standards on its multicultural populace.⁶⁹

The Ottomans prioritized granting more freedom to the heterogeneity of their population, allowing for the coexistence of various religious practices and facilitating cultural assimilation. Religion, in this context, became the foundation for protecting and binding diversity rather than imposing a singular religious perspective.

Conclusion

This study reframes traditional views of Ottoman power, shifting focus from expansive military might to the enduring strength fostered by a meticulously managed multiculturalism. The Empire's approach, encompassing protection, assimilation, and respect for differences, fostered social interactions marked by reverence for varied religious practices and the assimilation of cultural values. This, in turn, fortified the sustainability of governmental structures. The Ottomans, characterized by its avoidance of an oppressive model towards religions other than Islam and the absence of religion-based arrangements, embraced a moderate and pluralistic multiculturalism, avoiding both blind adherence to a single religion and enforcing religious conformity.

This study revealed the pluralistic model of multiculturalism within the Ottoman Empire by employing a method of organizing data for meaning, involving the collection, mapping, and identification of links used as the basis for drawing conclusions. This approach sheds light on how government structures intersected with diverse religious and cultural practices within the empire. However, it is important to note that this study focuses solely on the internal dynamics of Ottoman society, leaving the intriguing question of interaction with external European settlers unexplored. This limitation presents a valuable area for future research, promising deeper insights into the dynamics of

⁶⁵ Sylvia Rothschild, "A Jewish Perspective," in *Church, State and Religious Minorities*, ed. Tariq Modood (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997), 55.

⁶⁶ Tuula Sakaranaho, *Religious Freedom, Multiculturalism, Islam: Cross-Reading Finland and Ireland* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), 69.

⁶⁷ Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 198.

⁶⁸ Modood, "Introduction: The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe," 10.

⁶⁹ Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 198.





Ottoman multiculturalism in their interactions with external parties.

Acknowledgments

The authors thankfully acknowledge all contributors for their contributions.

Competing Interests

The corresponding author is also responsible for having ensured collective agreement between co-authors in all matters regarding manuscript publication. Therefore, the corresponding author needs to submit a statement of competing interests on behalf of all authors of the paper.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with all ethical standards and did not involve direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding Information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or nonprofit sectors.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were generated or analyzed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and assumptions presented in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency.

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