MUSLIMS, CHRISTIANS, AND JEWS: OTTOMAN LEGACIES AND THE MAKING OF MIDDLE EASTERN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

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The Ottoman Empire ruled large parts of the Middle East for centuries until its collapse following defeat in World War I. Across most of its existence, Ottoman imperial authorities applied distinctive policies towards Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups – policies that it inherited and adapted from earlier Islamic empires. First, the Ottoman state asserted the Islamic character of the state along with the social and legal dominance of Muslims over non-Muslims. Second, it recognized only three possible religions for subjects to follow: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. And third, it treated Christians and Jews as protected subordinates, who could persist and flourish in Islamic states as long as they followed certain behaviors, such as paying extra taxes, and as long as they respected Muslim domination.

This Islamic order began to unravel in the nineteenth century, as currents of change swept through the Ottoman Empire and convinced the sultans to make reforms. This "Tanzimat" or Reorganization era (1839-1876) drew partial inspiration from the French and American revolutions, with their ideals of citizenship and inclusive government. But its reforms also responded to the Ottoman state's desire to deflect threats from European imperial powers (especially Britain, France, and Russia) that were chipping away at its territories, and from internal nationalist groups (such as Greek Christians) who were seeking secession or demanding additional privileges. In a famous edict issued in 1856, the Ottoman sultan went so far as to claim that Christian and other non-Muslim subjects were "all equal and equally dear" in his eyes. Understood by British and American observers at the time as a move toward religious equality and religious freedom, the sultan's words represented a shocking reversal of historic Islamic-state claims for Muslim supremacy. The reforms certainly led to some changes: In years ahead, Christians and Jews, as non-Muslims, did acquire new social privileges such as the right to wear clothing that did not mark them as non-Muslims in public. At the same time, ideas that historians now call "secular" started to spread, making religion less visible in public. And yet, many old attitudes, laws, and customs persisted, so that social hierarchies which privileged Muslims over non-Muslims remained in place – at the least within the realm of social expectations. When a new sultan came to the throne in 1876 and re-asserted the empire's Islamic foundations, reforms slowed and the "Tanzimat" era ended.

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The dramatic shifts of the Ottoman nineteenth century – and in particular, changing relations among Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other smaller religious groups – set the stage for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Middle East. By considering legacies of Ottoman rule, we can more fully appreciate the challenges now facing religious minorities and majorities in countries like Syria and Iraq, which emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

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