

OPIUM FOR THE SUBJECTS?  
RELIGIOSITY AS A LEGITIMIZING  
FACTOR FOR THE OTTOMAN SULTAN

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On June 20, 1632 the Janissaries gathered once again in the shadow of Topkapı Palace. During the previous four months they had broken into the palace on several occasions, killed the grand vezir, and almost dethroned Sultan Murad IV, who at the time was not 20 years old. The sultan decided to assemble representatives of the Janissaries in the palace. Mustafa Na'ima (d. 1716), a court historian, describes the sequence of events almost a century later:

His excellency the sultan started talking to the chief agha of the Janissaries, the elders, the aghas of the regiments and [other] elders who were chosen to meet with the sultan by citing the Qur'anic verse, "Obey God, and obey the Messenger, and obey those charged with authority among you" (4:59). He translated it and elucidated its felicitous meaning and then explained that the soldiers of Islam (*asakir-i İslamiyye*) had been very loyally obedient to the members of the Ottoman family, that they were distinguished by the quality of eschewing opposition in every matter . . . He said [further] that the consequences of contentiousness would be weakness and disappointment in this world and the fires [of Hell] and the wrath of God the All-Compassionate in the other world . . . [When he] asked for a response, all the aghas and elders made their obeisance, and joyfully prayed for the sultan and said: "Our exalted sultan! You are our lord and the shadow of God. We harbor no opposition to you. We are friends to your friend and enemies to your enemy."

[Thereupon] the exalted sultan continued: "Now, the truth of this oath of yours will only be certain if you do not hide those unfortunates among you who would disagree and intrigue and oppose righteousness. Such persons oppose the orders of God and oppose the command of the Prophet, who said, 'I advise you to obey the ruler appointed over you, even if he is a slave from Ethiopia.' And they who do not obey the Caliph's—that is, my—orders are in the position of the rebellious Celalis and Kharijjs. It is these individuals who have contributed to your bad reputation." . . . After this speech, a Qur'an was produced and the sultan took the Janissaries' oath in person by asking [each

one], “Do you swear in the name of God?” (*vallahi mi, billahi mi?*). The Janissaries all ardently confirmed their oath by swearing on the Qur’an.<sup>1</sup>

*The “Mystique” of the Ottoman Sultan*

The idea that religion is largely an instrument of coercion did not originate with Marx. Kant cites it as one strong means of imposing social control over people by commanding obedience unattainable through external pressure—whether in the form of pure violence or other factors that prompt individuals to look after their own interests.<sup>2</sup> Not only can religion be an effective tool for establishing obedience, which may lead ultimately to legitimacy, it is also a factor that needs to be handled with extreme sensitivity in order to preserve legitimacy once it has been achieved. The passage from Na‘ima demonstrates how effective an argument founded in religious rhetoric can be in determining political events. Clearly, religion can have constructive impacts on the people, but also destructive ones. As Niklas Luhmann puts it, it can be integrative to the system, but disintegrative as well.<sup>3</sup> In this article I concern myself mainly with religion’s integrative impacts on the Sunni Muslim Ottoman population. I probe how the sultan utilized religious concerns to win acceptance by the populace. Then, I touch on how the sultan dealt with the rest of the population in religious matters.

I take it for granted that the Ottoman sultan’s legitimacy in the normative sense derived in part from the sacred function with which he was invested. The source of his right to rule was, in the end, divine. Yet from the outset I maintain that his religious qualities alone were not sufficient to ensure legitimacy. Whatever its nature and basis, legitimacy has to be backed by effective rule. Some of this success consists in institutions that ensure order, justice, supportable taxes, and so on—institutions that buttress the legitimacy of any regime. The rest stems from deeds that symbolize the ruler’s normative legitimacy. Such deeds are performed on a regular basis

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I want to thank the participants in a thought-provoking discussion about this paper at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University.

<sup>1</sup> Na‘ima, *Ta’rikh*, vol. 3 (Istanbul, 1280/1863<sup>3</sup>), 108–111. My free translation.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, vol. 8 (Berlin 1922 [1800]), 227, quoted by Herbert Marcuse, “Studie über Autorität und Familie,” *Ideen zu einer kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt, 1969), 82.

<sup>3</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt, 1982), 10–11.

to remind subjects continually of the foundations of normative legitimacy. Since the source of the Ottoman sultan's normative legitimacy was sacred authority, it would only naturally be shored up by deeds of a religious nature.

The term "religiosity," as I intend it here, needs clarification. One could question what, if anything, was outside the realm of religion in a pre-modern society like the Ottoman. The people were quite conscious, however, of the mundane (*dünyevî*) or otherworldly (*ukhrevî*) nature of their acts.<sup>4</sup> An *ehl-i dünya* person, whose acts were determined by his partiality to this transitory world, was considered less than religious. Religiosity in the context of this paper existed when deeds were performed that were accepted as being rewarded by God (*sevab*) in the Sunni Islamic tradition. Acts that were merely permissible (*mubah*) did not carry a legitimizing quality—to say nothing of others that were positively forbidden.

Members of a society in which religion is a central organizing force want to regard their ruler as religious even if they themselves are not particularly devout. A spiritual bond is perceived between the subject and the ruler, and this imagined bond plays a key role in conferring acceptance on the ruler. Particularly in societies with a monarchical tradition characterized by the divine right of kings, the sovereign or dynasty is enveloped in an aura that Marc Bloch has called a "mystique of royalty." In his book on the sacred qualities and supernatural powers attributed to monarchs in medieval England and France, Bloch describes how the people sought advantage for themselves in the sanctity of the ruler:

In every country, in those days [the middle ages and early modern period], kings were regarded as sacred, and in some countries at least were even believed to possess miraculous healing powers. For many centuries the kings of France and England used to "touch for scrofula," that is, they claimed to have the power, simply by their touch, to cure people suffering from this disease, and their subjects shared a common belief in their medicinal powers.<sup>5</sup>

The subject saw the ruler as a kind of intermediary between God and himself, facilitating the achievement of his own ambitions. This self-interest could be manipulated by the ruler to obtain obedience.

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this idea to Cemal Kafadar.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J.E. Anderson (Montreal, 1973), 3.

The degree to which subjects imagine their ruler to possess supernatural powers is of course directly proportionate to their propensity for religious and mystical feelings in general. People's sense of helplessness enhances their tendency to entertain supernatural expectations and their belief in a personage who can embody such expectations. Mysticism in this interpretation is nothing more than a popular fantasy. "In the pre-modern world," Bloch argues, "there was hardly any phenomenon they [our ancestors] were not prepared to explain by causes outside the normal order of the universe."<sup>6</sup> In the monotheistic religions marvels of this type are attributed to the prophets, to friends of God (*evliya*), and to their latter-day successors. Aziz Al-Azmeh has investigated how the notion of the caliphate was considered a divine legacy in pre-Ottoman times.<sup>7</sup> The Ottoman sultan was therefore deemed semi-sacred already simply because he occupied an office deemed the legacy of the Prophet.

I do not want to over-emphasize the sacred image of the sultan among his subjects, but I would argue that the Ottoman ruler, like other medieval and early modern monarchs, was enfolded in a mystical aura.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, he was regarded rather as the representative of worldly power, hence less sacred than say a master of a religious order. The disciples of a sheikh, for instance, believed more deeply in their master's supernatural powers than the subjects of the sultan. Nevertheless, some indicators attest that the sultan too was regarded by at least some portion of his subjects as guided by the divine will and receiving God's direct assistance.

Such an image of the ruler was not uncommon in pre-modern societies. It did not disappear entirely with the advent of the modern world. An example as late as the early 20th century will suffice. In his memoirs Lutfi Simavi, a high palace functionary, mentions the common belief that raging fires in the city would at once be extinguished as soon as the sultan personally arrived on the scene.<sup>9</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, 243.

<sup>7</sup> Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian, and Pagan Politics* (New York, 2001<sup>2</sup>), 160 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Remarkable studies on the mystical/sacral qualities of medieval and early modern European kings have been produced recently, for example, see *La Royauté Sacrée dans le Monde Chrétien*, ed. Alain Boureau and Sergio Ingerflom (Paris, 1992); Paul Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589–1715* (New Haven – London, 1999); Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Lutfi Simavi, *Sultan Mehmed Reşad Khanın ve khalefinin sarayında gördüklerim*, vol. 2 (Istanbul, 1342/1924), 151.

documentary record suggests that sultans in fact routinely sped to the sites of fires, even at night. Sultan Selim III, for example, immediately boarded his imperial boat on seeing smoke rising from the Asian side of Istanbul on July 9, 1791. He reached the place and stayed there until the fire was extinguished. On his way back to the palace he spotted another fire and raced to that location as well.<sup>10</sup>

An entry in Cabî's chronicle for February 1810 is another example of attempts to promote this image. On one of his strolls in Istanbul in disguise, Sultan Selim III heard a woman, who had waited long in line to get bread, curse with the words, "May the sultan's eyes be blind! Look at this trouble and suffering we have to go through to get a loaf of bread." An officer in the sultan's entourage, also incognito, interrupted her, saying that it was not the sultan who was responsible for what [the subjects] were suffering from. It was their own sins that God was punishing. Irritated by the episode, the sultan returned to the palace, went to the chamber where the mantle of the Prophet was preserved and prayed to God that the Muslims' welfare be maintained. The next day, still confused by the event, the sultan sent the woman a considerable amount of money. His aides-de-camp went to her house only to find out that she had been afflicted by a pain in her eyes overnight, and had gone blind by morning. According to Cabî, the woman's questioning the sultan's true godliness (*velayet*) and her ingratitude (*küfran-ı ni'am*) were the causes of this punishment. This event, so the historian avers, made the sultan's holiness and miracles (*velayet ve keramât*) evident to everyone.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, not everyone envisioned the sultan as sacred, or treated him with the same passion. These internal constructions had much to do with power relations. The political elite or opposition were very much aware of his political and personal weaknesses. This hindered their attribution to him of *auctoritas divina*, since somebody God assists directly should not lack for strength. To them, as an individual the sultan was not sacred; the office he occupied was. Therefore it was no contradiction that sultans were sometimes executed during revolts. As long as a sultan was deemed worthy of the office he held, he continued to possess or inherit sacred qualities. When this

<sup>10</sup> Cf. III. Selim'in sıvkatibi Ahmed Efendi tarafından tutulan rûznâme, ed. Sema Arıkan (Ankara, 1993), 25, passim.

<sup>11</sup> Cabî Ömer Efendi, *Cabî tarihi: Tarih-i Sultan Selim-i salis ve Mahmud-ı sani*, ed. Mehmet Ali Beyhan, vol. 1 (Ankara, 2003), 604–605.

was not the case he could be dethroned. As soon as a new sultan assumed power, he was invested with the sacred qualities of the office as well. The sultan's image as a sacred ruler certainly changed over the centuries, and we can assume that there were turning points, events or policies promoted by the palace in the effort to maximize the sultan's image of sanctity. This theme is important and deserves further research.

Beyond the aura of his crown, the sultan's *personal* religiosity also had a legitimizing effect. As stated, this article investigates the strategies applied by the Ottoman sultans to obtain acceptance from the subjects by way of promoting their religious qualities. Sacredness that is believed in, however, is much more powerful; and sacredness cannot exist without being buttressed by religiosity. As we will see below, conspicuously devout behavior by the sultan propped up his sacred image. What effect, then, did it have on his subjects? Guided by either a worldly or an otherworldly pragmatism, subjects may or may not be content with the person who rules them; and it is ultimately general contentment among subjects that confers legitimacy on a ruler.

Subjects of a monarchical regime whose legitimacy rests on sacred authority find certain advantages in being governed by a "divine" ruler. For example, by entering into a relationship with him one may secure fulfillment of a prayer or wish. This "relationship" could be cemented by a single glance during a public ritual. The subjects are thus eager to exploit the ruler's more intimate relationship with God, and the more religious the ruler, the easier it is for people to satisfy their desires. Ruler and ruled exist in a symbiotic relationship of mutual interest: in a number of pre-modern societies catastrophes such as scarcity, famine, and other natural disasters are widely regarded as divine punishment for a ruler's poor administration.<sup>12</sup>

Before examining the relations between the Ottoman sultan and his subjects, we have to ask how anyone might come to believe that the sultan was "religious" and, moreover, that he was a "sacred" personage. We can imagine that a Muslim subject, as a product of Ottoman society, was first of all steeped in an existing complex of

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies* (Oxford – et al., 1989), 47. For the expression of this belief, see Nizamulmuluk, *Das Buch der Staatskunst: Siyasatnama*, ed. Karl Schabinger (Zürich, 1987), 242.

popular beliefs. But such beliefs were not accepted without question: they were confirmed only by experience. A person witnessed the sultan actually performing his religious obligations or heard that he was performing them, and finally saw with his or her own eyes the institutions created by the sultan to facilitate subjects' practice of their religion. A common belief in the sacredness of the sultan, it seems, could form in society's collective memory only over a long period of time.

*How Devout Was the Sultan? The Demonstration Effect*

I shall examine the Ottoman sultan's efforts to gain popular acceptance on religious grounds under two headings, which I call "demonstrative" and "tangible." The first regards strategies that are concerned with his image, the second with actual deeds. The two are sometimes difficult to distinguish clearly, although the dyad is useful for heuristic purposes. "Demonstrative" strategies center on the sultan's person, his image if you will, and the dynastic family. To be regarded as religious, the sultan had to give the impression—accurate or not—that he indeed was religious and to take—or project the image of taking—steps that accorded with generally accepted religious precepts. Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) gives us a useful insight into the relationship between ruler and ruled in pre-modern monarchies:

It is not essential that a Prince should have all the good qualities which I have enumerated above, but it is most essential that he should *seem* to have them. . . . Thus, it is well to *seem* merciful, faithful, humane, religious, and upright. . . . A Prince should therefore be very careful that nothing ever escapes his lips which is not replete with the five qualities above named, so that to see and hear him, one would think him the embodiment of mercy, good faith, integrity, humanity, and religion, and *there is no virtue which is more necessary for him to seem to possess than this last*; because men in general judge rather by the eye than by the hand, for everyone can see but few can touch. Everyone sees what you seem, but few know what you are, and these few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state to back them up.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. W. Eliot (New York, 1965), 58–59, italics added.

Machiavelli's recommendations presuppose that the people are easily gulled. Based on their needs, however, the people in fact have demands and need a sense that the regime will attempt to respond to those demands. This feeling of responsiveness launches a process whereby they come to believe that the regime represents their own interests.<sup>14</sup> For the man in the street to believe that the sultan is religious, the sultan must manifest his religiosity overtly.

The widely held view that the Ottoman sultans waged holy war in order to impose the true religion on unbelievers was a key argument for sovereign legitimacy, for ordinary Muslims as for members of the learned class. Numerous sheikhs and influential clerics who supported the Ottoman sultanate regarded the sultans' attempts to enlarge the Islamic realm and defend it against enemies and harmful and dangerous ideas (*rafz u ilkhad* or *dalalet*) as sufficient reason to be satisfied with the dynasty. Some sufi sheikhs traveled all over the empire, finding a wide audience for such views. The Egyptian thinker Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) asserted that the Ottoman state was a central Islamic article of belief—following God and His Prophet—because it protected the religion of Islam and its domain.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, even late-period sultans, who never themselves went on military campaigns, obtained the title of *gazi* through special *fetvas*. In sustaining the sultan's image as a holy warrior, the religious establishment was obviously the key.

The sultan's procession to the mosque for Friday prayers was an established ritual in Islamic polities. Still, like other public attestations to the religious way of life practiced in the palace, such an act can be regarded as so much propaganda. Other examples are the *bed-i besmele* ceremonies that took place when Ottoman princes began reading the Qur'an and the *khatim* ceremonies held when they finished; the recitations of the *mevlid*, a ritual commemorating the anniversary of the Prophet's birth, usually celebrated at the Sultanahmed mosque; the visit to the Mantle of the Prophet on the 15th of Ramadan. These and other public rituals all suggest close and conscious attention to the religious theatrics of sovereignty. Such events later found a place in Ottoman chronicles, and ultimately, in the 19th century,

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<sup>14</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt, 1977<sup>4</sup>), 141.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad 'Abduh* (London, 1933), 62, quotes 'Abduh.

also filled the front pages of official government gazettes.<sup>16</sup> The sultan sent many precious gifts and money to Mecca and Medina every year, accompanied by a special ceremony. Nahifi, an Ottoman bureaucrat who lived in the second half of the 17th and the first decades of the 18th century (d. 1738), wrote a treatise entitled *Counsel for Vezirs*, in which he put special emphasis on annual gifts to the inhabitants of these “most honorable cities.”<sup>17</sup>

Another ritual favored by the palace was the transportation to Istanbul of objects believed to be of religious value. They were mostly sacred relics from the Kaaba, and their “donation” to the capital city was accompanied by ostentatiously reverent ceremonies. In 1813, for example, when Mehmed ‘Ali Paşa crushed the Wahhabite uprising, the keys to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina were brought to Istanbul, where they were first kept for a few days at the tomb of Eyüb Ensari. Later they were transferred to Topkapı Palace in a solemn procession joined by all the men of state. According to an account by Hafız İlyas Aga, who personally witnessed the affair, many onlookers were so choked with emotion that they were “drowning in tears.” The keys were received personally at the Imperial Gate by Sultan Mahmud II, who respectfully accompanied them all the way to the Chamber of the Prophet’s Mantle.<sup>18</sup>

A similar ceremony was staged periodically with the arrival in Istanbul of the discarded cloth covering for the Kaaba following the dispatch of a new one to Mecca during the month of the holy pilgrimage.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the golden cover for the *hacer ül-esved*—the black stone believed to have come from heaven and displayed at the southeastern corner of the Kaaba<sup>20</sup>—and the cover for the Prophet Muhammad’s cell at Medina were also replaced from time to time. The old ones, publicly displayed at a location such as Eyüb Mosque, satisfied the desire of Istanbul residents to partake of the blessings

<sup>16</sup> For examples, see Ahmed Lutfi, *Ta’rih*, vol. 3 (Istanbul, 1290/1873), 163; vol. 4, 102; further see Orhan Koloğlu, *Takvimi vekayi: Türk gazeteciliğinin 100. yılı* (Ankara, [1981]), 90. For *mevlids*, for example, see *Taqvim-i veqayî* (Istanbul), nos. 86, 106, 130, 131, 149, 150, 180, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Mehmet İpşirli, “Nahifînin *Nasihatü’l-Vüzerası*,” *Tarih Enstitüsü dergisi* 15 (1997), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Hızır İlyas, *Ta’rih-i enderun* (Istanbul, 1276/1859), 41–44; Ahmed Cevdet, *Ta’rih-i Cevdet*, vol. 7 (Istanbul: 1309/1891–92<sup>2</sup>), 424.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ahmed Lutfi, *Ta’rih*, ed. Münir Aktepe, vol. 9 (Ankara, 1984), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lutfi, *Ta’rih*, vol. 9, 63–64. For the ceremony held with the arrival of this cover in Istanbul, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter BOA), A.AMD 35/27 (25 Receb 1268/15 May 1852).

of such sacred relics. In August 1862, for example, a newspaper reported that cover of the Prophet's cell was to be displayed at Eyüb before being transferred with great pomp to the Topkapı Palace:

As the cloth covering of the Prophet Muhammad's cell was replaced, the exalted sultan saw fit that the discarded one should be [displayed] at the tomb of Hazret-i Halid [i.e., Eyüb Ensari] . . . until the day of the procession . . . for all the people who wished to see it.<sup>21</sup>

The same newspaper announced a few days later that the day of the procession had been postponed since "not everyone has been able to take advantage of the display." The cover would therefore be available for viewing for a few more days. Some days later the cover was brought from Eyüb to the Chamber of the Prophet's Mantle at Topkapı Palace.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, at the end of the 19th century, when Topkapı Palace was no longer the sultan's residence, it was customary for the Prophet's Mantle to be displayed publicly for three days following a ceremonial viewing by the sultan himself on the 15th of Ramadan. This custom, which was abandoned during the reign of 'Abdülhamid II due to security concerns, was revived in 1908 by popular demand.<sup>23</sup>

The sensitivity shown by the Palace to such sacred relics resulted in the discovery of a number of such objects which were either sold or presented as gifts to the palace.<sup>24</sup> In 1872, for example, a Kurdish sheikh from Hakkari presented a pair of clogs he claimed had belonged to the Prophet to the Chamber of Sacred Relics at the palace. The palace accepted and the sheikh himself brought the clogs overland as far as Samsun on the Black Sea coast while the daily papers recounted numerous miracles that had occurred along the way. Following an ostentatious reception at Samsun, the relics were dispatched by steamship to Istanbul, where they were received at Sirkeci by a delegation consisting of the grand vezir and prominent men of

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<sup>21</sup> *Ruzname-i ceride-i havadis* (Istanbul), no. 450, 27 Safer 1279/23 August 1862. For similar ceremonies staged for the arrival of the cover from Medina and for the organization of the processions, see BOA, BEO, Sadaret defterleri 365 (Register of Ceremonies), 71–72 (1254/1838).

<sup>22</sup> *Ruzname-i ceride-i havadis* (Istanbul), no. 453, 1 Rebiülevvel 1279/27 August 1862; cf. *ibid.*, no. 456.

<sup>23</sup> *Sabah*, no. 6843, 16 Ramazan 1326/12 October 1908.

<sup>24</sup> Such abuse of relic-cults is a phenomenon unique neither to the Ottomans nor to this particular time. For examples, see "Relics," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 10 (1956<sup>4</sup>), 650–662.

state. In a procession replete with prayer beads and ritual declarations of God's unity, they were brought to the palace and transferred in a ceremony to the chamber where they would be preserved. Sultan 'Abdülaziz himself paid a visit to the relics following the Friday prayers.<sup>25</sup>

Ottoman chronicles record that the sultans periodically visited the tombs of certain saints in and outside Istanbul. The favored venues for such visits were the burial sites of persons unanimously regarded among the people as major saints (*qutb*), such as the tombs of Emir Sultan (d. 1429) in Bursa and Yazıcızade Mehmed Efendi (d. 1451) in Gelibolu.<sup>26</sup> Yazıcızade was a well-known and highly regarded religious personage, whose reputation was based on his *Muhammediyye*, a rhymed composition about the life of the Prophet which, because of its simple language and poignant narration, was one of the most popular religious books among commoners. Besides the visits to his grave, until the very last period of the empire the "holograph" copy of the *Muhammediyye*, encircled by a legend that certain of its pages had been burned by its author's own "sighs," was regularly brought to Istanbul upon the accession of a new sultan. After being brought into the sultan's presence, the book was also viewed by high state officials.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Tangible Efforts*

The second group of more tangible efforts aimed at fostering legitimacy consists of deeds regularly performed by the sultan. These

<sup>25</sup> [A.D. Mordtmann] *Stambul und das moderne Türkenthum*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1877), 161–162; cf. the newspapers *Basiret* and *Haqa'iq ül-veqayif*, quoted by Butrus Abu Manneh, "The Sultan and the Bureaucracy: The Anti-Tanzimat Concepts of Grand Vizier Mahmud Nedim Paşa," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22 (1990), 268–269. For objects of religious symbolism purchased by the palace in the 19th century, see also Selim Deringil, "Abdülhamid dönemi Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda simgesel ve törensel doku: 'görünmeden görünmek,'" *Toplum ve Bilim* 62 (1993), 34–35.

<sup>26</sup> For some of the sultan's visits to Gelibolu, see Na'ima, *Ta'rih*, vol. 2 (Istanbul, 1280/1863<sup>3</sup>), 101 (Anno 1022/1613). Both Mahmud II and 'Abdülmecid on their journeys to Çanakkale and 'Abdülaziz on his return from Egypt visited the türbe at Gelibolu; cf. Lutfi, *Ta'rih*, vol. 9, 32; *Ruzname-i ceride-i havadis*, no. 621, 12 Zilqade 1279/30 April 1863. Cf. also Na'ima, *Ta'rih*, vol. 3, 181, for visits to the tomb of Emir Sultan and other tombs in Bursa in 1043/1633.

<sup>27</sup> Cf., for example, Lutfi, *Ta'rih*, vol. 10, 25 (Anno 1278/1861).

were generally of a religious nature and of direct material concern to the masses, facilitating their lives in some way, for example, by providing a safe environment in which they could fulfill their religious obligations. In classical treatises on the theory of the imamate, services of this sort are regarded as being among the imam/sultan's foremost duties. They were to be performed, and then publicly announced, thereby generating public opinion to the effect that, for example, a secure environment for worship had been created. Reports of such deeds are frequently encountered in Ottoman histories.<sup>28</sup>

As Faroqhi has demonstrated in her book on the pilgrimage, the fact that the Ottoman sultans controlled Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, and the pilgrimage routes passing through them, was a source of enormous prestige, in the eyes of their own subjects and of other Muslim peoples. At the same time, it thrust a great responsibility upon them. The importance of the sultan's role as steward of the holy cities is readily apparent. After Istanbul, the dynasty had to provide them with the largest number of municipal services and maintain the holy buildings in good repair at all times. It was obliged to grant these regions substantial material assistance, for example, the sultan's gifts sent annually to meet local needs. Moreover, the sultan also had to guarantee the security of the annual caravan carrying pilgrims to Mecca, ensuring its safe arrival and return either by fending off any bandits who might attack it on its way through the desert or by paying a certain sum to the local Bedouin for this protection. Ensuring the safety of the pilgrimage route was certainly one of the important services the pilgrims expected from the sultan. Some Muslims traveled all the way from Central Asia to Anatolia, even to Istanbul, to join the caravan departing from the Ottoman capital. Furthermore, the caravan had to be supplied with adequate water and other needs both en route and in the Hijaz itself. Food prices in the Hijaz were kept low through subsidies provided by local pious foundations, and the Bedouin who held various springs along the way were also rewarded materially in return for their use.<sup>29</sup> Apart from this, all along the pilgrimage route members of the Ottoman dynasty provided several public services, primarily drinking fountains.

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<sup>28</sup> For example, cf. Cevdet, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 6, 97–98.

<sup>29</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans, 1517–1683* (New York, 1994).

By publicizing all these services among those actually making the pilgrimage, and also among potential future pilgrims, an attempt was made to promote among Muslim peoples generally the notion of the Ottomans as the rightful rulers of the Hijaz. Such views served up by the Ottoman government for public consumption also illustrate the sort of services the people expected from it in connection with the Hijaz. Quoted below is a news item that figured prominently on the front page of a semi-official Ottoman gazette in the 1840s:

Thanks be to God that under the auspices of His Imperial Majesty food is plentiful and cheap in the Hijaz, and because the Bedouin Arabs in the vicinity of the holy cities are quiet in perfect obedience and submission . . . the pilgrimage [is going to be carried out] safely again this year.<sup>30</sup>

The commissioning of religious structures such as mosques, madrasas, dervish lodges, and soup kitchens may be cited among the sultan's deeds that were of direct benefit to the people. Ottoman sultans expended large sums on the construction and repair of charitable structures. The meat of ritually slaughtered animals was periodically distributed to the common people.

Besides these regular messages from the palace, oral propaganda was an indispensable tool for ensuring that such deeds were discussed publicly in the various parts of the empire. Probably the most effective means of propaganda among the common people in Ottoman society were the mystical orders and sermons preached in the mosques. Among groups capable of stirring up agitation among the people, the state was most wary of those that were religious in character. In this context, it is not surprising that Mustafa 'Ali (d. 1600) in his 16-item list of the requirements of the sultanate devoted a special article to the silencing of preachers who spoke against the state:

The eleventh requirement [of kings] is that the insolent and slanderous preachers who in their sermons become abusive and scold people have to be stopped . . . It is their duty to restrict their sermons and speeches to the citation of sacred traditions and to exegesis [of the Qur'an], and from time to time to tell certain parables and stories that confirm the sacred message [of the Qur'an], but nothing else, and they may not slander and insult people and in particular the illustrious elite . . . Gathering around them a crowd of brainless rabble they

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<sup>30</sup> *Ceride-i havadis*, no. 53, 9 Şaban 1257/ 25 September 1841; cf. *ibid.*, no. 54.

boldly attack with various nonsense the conduct and the words of God's Caliph, the order of the world, the behavior and acts of the imperial statesmen. But as a matter of fact, their improper speeches may cause—may God the Exalted forbid it!—hate and disgust against the king of the world among the people and distrust and contempt vis-à-vis his vezirs and statesmen.<sup>31</sup>

Two preachers were dismissed in the summer of 1848, as one document in the Ottoman archives describes it, for confounding people's minds (*iddal-i ezhan*). They had the effrontery to engage in idle and vicious talk about the state, even going so far as to criticize the sultan, "who was admired by the whole universe," during sermons they delivered at the Fatih and Ayasofya mosques in Istanbul.<sup>32</sup>

The mystical orders also provided the sultan with a channel to the common people on matters of religious significance concerning himself. In Ottoman society, in which sheikhs exercised enormous influence over the people, the sultan was obviously under some pressure to cater to these leaders of the mystical orders, materially and spiritually. The thousands of disciples accessible through the empire's hundreds of dervish lodges presumably had no difficulty sincerely believing what the sheikhs told them regarding the sultan's fulfillment of the obligations of an Islamic ruler. Members of a society with inflated religious zeal were exactly the type of subjects sought by the regime for their total resignation.

Most of the sultans were in fact members of mystical orders themselves, and they paid frequent visits to the dervish lodges. Some of these lodges were exempt from taxes, and, moreover, were allotted land and salaries from the palace, which assisted in their construction and repairs as well. It is well known, for example, that newly enthroned sultans made generous material contributions to the dervish lodges.<sup>33</sup> With these two types of oral propaganda tools, the majority of the Ottoman Muslims were covered: mosque-goers with a fairly straightforward perception of Islam, and sufis, who generally had non-orthodox tendencies.

<sup>31</sup> Andreas Tietze, *Mustafa 'Alî's Counsel for Sultans of 1581*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1979), 55–56, 148.

<sup>32</sup> BOA, A.AMD 38/63 (16 Ramazan 1268/5 August 1848).

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Na'ima, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 3, 432 (Anno 1049/1640).

*The Target Population*

In attempting to frame the Ottoman sultan's efforts to support his legitimacy by religious means, I have focused attention on Ottoman Muslims sharing the interpretation of Islam represented by the regime. However, if we accept that the Ottoman sultan's normative legitimacy was based on the sacred duty with which he was charged, we must ask how the sultan was regarded by his non-Muslim subjects, who formed a large segment of the empire's population, and by Muslims whom the regime branded as heretics.

If the people can practice their religion freely, the state's efficacy may be enough to content them. That the Ottomans did not follow a policy aimed at immediate and enforced change of religion or identity was probably an important factor in making the non-Muslim subjects tolerate the regime. Furthermore, the Ottoman sultans did engage in activities to manipulate the religious sensibilities of their non-Muslim subjects as well. An interesting document in which a Christian subject personally describes a visit to a church by Sultan Mehmed II (d. 1481) gives us a rare insight into the perceptions of common people. This important testimony enables us to appreciate the public impact of the sultan's visit directly from a member of the audience:

My fellow residents in Pera told me that he [Mehmed II] entered their church [St. Dominicus] and took a seat in the choir to observe the ceremony and the manner of the worship service. At his request they also celebrated a Mass in his presence . . . He discussed the laws and rites of the Christians with them as well, and, when he heard that the churches were headed by bishops, he even desired that a bishop be appointed for the care of the Christians and promised to do everything necessary in his power to provide his unlimited assistance. But how could anyone who heard from afar of his wars and victories, of the great size of his army, and of his fame and majesty imagine him to possess such simple frankness, or, if he did hear of it, not admire it?<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Georgius de Hungaria, *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia turcorum* <Traktat über die Sitten, die Lebensverhältnisse und die Arglist der Türken>, nach der Erstausgabe von 1481 herausgegeben, übersetzt und eingeleitet von Reinhard Klockow (Köln – et al., 1993), 225–227.

“A great and most noble and merciful ruler” said Samuel De Medina, a 16th-century rabbi from Salonica, of Sultan Süleyman (d. 1566), in one of his responsa, or legal decisions. He further stated that under the rule of this benevolent sultan Jews were offered the opportunity to live happily and prosperously.<sup>35</sup> Such an affirmative comment, made by an eminent religious personage, was probably received with few reservations by his congregation. The contentment of the Jews is certainly understandable, as the Ottoman lands *were* indeed one of the securest places for them at the time.

As a rule the Ottoman government allowed the construction and restoration of new churches or synagogues only rarely. Permits for renovations were precious, a privilege granted exclusively by the sultan himself. The assistance provided by Mahmud II on his tour of Rumelia may be cited as an example. In a speech he had Vassaf Efendi read in Shumla, a city in today’s Bulgaria, he said: “You Greeks, Armenians, Jews, you are all servants of God, and you are all my subjects—just as good as the Muslims. Your beliefs are different, but you all obey the laws and my imperial orders.” Helmuth von Moltke, a Prussian officer traveling with the sultan, recorded in his *Letters from Turkey* that “at the end of [the speech] the sultan inquired whether anybody among the non-Muslims had any complaints or whether their churches needed repairs.” In another village he even donated money for the repairs of the churches.<sup>36</sup> Mahmud’s behavior cannot be taken as representative for all the Ottoman periods. This was a part of his greater project at this time to integrate the politically unstable non-Muslim subjects. Still, the main issue of this integration project was the religious sensitivities of the non-Muslim groups.

The masses in the Ottoman churches usually contained a section where the priest mentioned the name of the sultan and prayed for him. The Beirut Patriarchate’s declaration of loyalty on the 25th anniversary of the sultan’s accession provides an example. The declaration appearing in *al-Bashir*, a Jesuit newspaper published in Beirut, expresses how deeply and willingly obedient the Christian communities were at the time under Ottoman rule and notes the many cer-

<sup>35</sup> Morris Goodblatt, *Jewish Life in Turkey in the 16th Century as Reflected in the Legal Writings of Samuel De Medina* (New York, 1952), 118.

<sup>36</sup> [Helmuth v. Moltke], *Briefe über Zustände und Begebenheiten in der Türkei aus den Jahren 1835 bis 1839* (Berlin – et al., 1841), 131, 142.

emonies to be conducted, and churches to be decorated, to celebrate this auspicious day. It then calls on all Christians to pray for the permanence of the sultan.<sup>37</sup> Now to take the declaration at face value might be too naive. The Patriarchate probably asked the people to pray for the sultan not because he was the best possible ruler but out of a well-considered desire to get along with the political authority. Whatever the intentions, such an act served the political power's aim of having obedient Christian subjects.

I do not want to exaggerate the positive aspects of the sultan's relationship with his non-Muslim subjects. It was not all beer and skittles. Certainly, every society has its positive sides and weaknesses. Socially dominant groups do not easily share their privileges with traditionally underprivileged groups. Ideally, the ruler's task was to turn his attention to different social groups while calculating the outcomes with regard to his own interests. My aim here is only to look at the sultan's approach to his non-Muslim subjects regarding religious matters, some of which, I believe, might have been viewed positively and led them to accept his legitimacy.

As for groups representing unorthodox Islamic views, the picture is even less bright. However complex the reasons for the uprisings might have been, since these groups usually professed the antithesis to official Islam promoted by the state, it was apparently considered more expedient simply to crush them. A middle way would possibly have attracted more displeasure from the mainstream Sunni Muslim majority.

#### *Epilogue and "Disclaimer"*

I have tried to enumerate the endeavors of the Ottoman sultans to prop up their legitimacy through acts of a religious nature. One still unanswered question, however, is what effect the Ottoman sultans' failure to make the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina had on commoners. I have not come across any evidence of a public justification by the palace. Ottoman authors, as far as I know, remained silent on the issue. We can reasonably believe that the

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<sup>37</sup> *Al-Bashir* (Beirut), no. 1452, September 1, 1900. My thanks to Malik Sharif for telling me about this source.

Ottoman Muslims were aware that the “Caliph” did not go on the *hacc*. Accordingly, two ways whereby the Muslim subjects grasped this omission seem plausible: they were convinced that the sultan was an exception; and that he had other Islamic duties to execute. His absence from the *hacc* was therefore accepted as consistent with his title. In fact, in his *fetwa* commanding Osman II (d. 1622) to renounce his intention of going on the pilgrimage, Chief Mufti Üsküdari Mahmud Efendi justified his opinion by saying that the sultans had no need to perform the *hacc* at all. They should better stay in their places and maintain justice.<sup>38</sup>

Unspoken discontent about this point quite possibly existed. We can surmise that any potentially unfavorable impact of the sultans’ failure to go on the pilgrimage would only emerge with the more general dissatisfaction that did occasionally surface in Ottoman society. Such discontent must have intensified at times of the state’s military failures. I have however discovered no document or incident to support this hypothesis. It is interesting that even in the Ottoman dynasty’s most beleaguered moments, non-attendance at Mecca and Medina was never used against it. This was so even in the 19th century, when the sultan began gradually to lose his “divine” status amid the general *Entzauberung der Welt*, in Weber’s words, or the disenchantment of the world. Given that in the 19th century the sultan did travel to Egypt and to Europe, can we simply assume that no one was uncomfortable with his not having made the pilgrimage to Mecca? These questions must await further research.

I want to finish this article by clearing my conscience. An excessively functionalist perspective which looks for a political motivation behind all of the sultan’s religiously tinged deeds may run the risk of historiographic distortion, if not positive injustice. By taking this path, we forfeit the possibility that a political personage might in fact perform a charitable deed simply in accordance with his own religious or ethical values. Whatever the political advantages or disadvantages that might accrue in the end, even the sultans, who were after all human, may have engaged in charity in the expectation of either otherworldly or worldly (but not necessarily political) benefits.

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<sup>38</sup> Na’ima, *Ta’rikh*, vol. 2, 211. Thanks to Leslie Peirce for her reference to this source.

If we approach the question without undue skepticism, we may regard ‘Abdülhamid I’s wish to visit a tomb in disguise as innocently apolitical.<sup>39</sup> That such visits were nevertheless made according to an official schedule does strengthen the possibility that politics was somehow involved.

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<sup>39</sup> Baha Gürfırat, “El yazıları ile padişahlar,” *Belgelerle Türk tarihi dergisi* 4 (January 1968), 75–76.