Book Reviews

Hasan Çolak

The Orthodox Church in the Early Modern Middle East: Relations between the Ottoman Central Administration and the Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2015), pp. xii, 282, ISBN 978-975-163-007-0.

While the *millet* system has been recognized as a somewhat mythical concept perpetuated by scholarship for a long time, the idea of the centralizing role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople over the Orthodox Church has mostly remained unquestioned. Hasan Çolak, in his monograph *The Orthodox Church in the Early Modern Middle East: Relations between the Ottoman Central Administration and the Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria*, traces interactions and reciprocal relations between the Ottoman central administration and the Eastern Patriarchates in the early modern period, bringing complex and multifaceted processes of accommodation and cooperation to the fore.

The work heavily relies on Ottoman archival documents, notably correspondence preserved at the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul, comprising appeals by Ottoman subjects from the Eastern Patriarchates as well as copies of decisions in response to such petitions, and additional documents from the Archives of the Topkapı Palace Museum. Greek, French, English and Arabic sources have also been included – letters by private individuals, missionaries and diplomats, memoirs, reports as well as narrative texts, such as accounts by travellers and ambassadors. This textual basis across a wide array of languages and of diverse provenience permits a multifaceted view of the problem. Not least due to this impressive basis, Çolak's history of the Orthodox Church is a work relevant to the fields of Ottoman studies, Near Eastern studies and Church history.

In the introduction to his work, Çolak presents an overview of the historiography on the Eastern Patriarchates. He traces the growing scholarly emphasis on the role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople over the Eastern Patriarchates and the support of the Ottoman administration for Phanar. He recognizes this development from the first pioneer works of nineteenth-century historiography

as concurrent with the emergence of the “millet theory”, itself based on the centralizing policies of the Ottoman administration. In the context of twentieth-century scholarship, Çolak particularly emphasizes the impact of Steven Runciman's hypothesis regarding the supremacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople over the other Patriarchates, as formulated in his book *The Great Church in Captivity: a Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). The Patriarchate of Constantinople, according to Runciman, emerged as a kind of “mediator” and “arbitrator”.

This paradigm quickly became the scholarly norm, counterbalanced only to a limited degree by the appearance of a body of scholarship analysing the history of the Eastern patriarchates from a provincial perspective, through local texts. Such studies – which not infrequently served nationalist agendas of the Ottoman successor states – tended to focus on purely local dynamics to the detriment of broader contexts and particularly relations to the centre. Works on the church in the last decades, written by church-related historians themselves, though insightful, similarly tend to follow an isolated approach.

The main part of Çolak's *The Orthodox Church* follows a chronological trajectory, dividing the interactions between the Eastern Patriarchates and the Ottoman administration into two different stages: one before and one after a movement towards centralization, a conceptual framework to which I will return further below.

The first chapter, entitled “Eastern Patriarchates and Ottoman Administration: 16th-17th Centuries”, deals with the relations of the Eastern Patriarchates with the Ottoman administration before what the author perceives to be an onset of centralization. The chapter opens with an exploration of the position of the Patriarchates under Mamluk rule and under the ecclesiastical influence of Constantinople that had emerged “as the centre of the global Orthodoxy” (p. 49). While the inclusion of all Patriarchates under the Ottomans in the period following the conquests facilitated interaction and permitted easier access to the Patriarch of Constantinople, the latter had no dominant control over the other Patriarchs. In the absence of a constant supporter, Eastern Patriarchs turned to foreign courts. Çolak traces an interest in Protestant and later Catholic courts, but particularly the relations with Russia began to blossom – also due to an intensified interest in Greek culture in Russia in the seventeenth century. The semi-independent trans-Danubian principalities Moldavia and Wallachia with Orthodox rulers also supported the Orthodox Patriarchates.

Çolak's analysis in this chapter is most successful where he shifts his focus from the macro level to the micro level – for example in his close readings of the Ottoman correspondence with the Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria

and Jerusalem in the seventeenth century (pp. 90–108). In the framework of three case studies, he explores the Antiochene patriarchal struggle between Kyrillos and Athanasios, the Alexandrian patriarchal struggle between Samouil and Kosmas and Jerusalem's relations with the Ottoman central and provincial administration. The three case studies reveal direct ties between the Eastern Patriarchates and Ottoman authorities. Çolak points to missing reference to the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the first and the third case and, in the second case, to Ottoman affirmations of the independence of the Patriarchate of Alexandria from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the matter of the parallel appointment of Kosmas by the Patriarch of Constantinople to the seat of Alexandria. On this basis, Çolak convincingly argues that encroachments of the Patriarchate of Constantinople during this stage still ended in failure – although it must be observed that this is (mostly) an argument *ex negativo*, inferred from missing reference in the documents investigated. Future research, particularly into correspondence between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the three Eastern Patriarchates might nuance this picture.

Starting with the second chapter, “Coming of the 18th Century: Church Centralisation in an Age of Political Decentralisation”, Çolak turns to the second phase in the relations between the Ottoman authorities, the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Eastern Patriarchates – a phase he sees as marked by a high degree of centralization. While the eighteenth century, a period when provincial elites and local magnates rose to power, is usually perceived by scholars as an era of decentralization in the Ottoman empire, Çolak argues, two driving forces gave an impetus for centralization within the Orthodox Church. The first is the growing impact of Catholic missionary activities in the Ottoman empire, the second an “economic-cum-political flowering” (p. 111) of lay elites in the imperial capital.

Chapter two explores both developments. After an account of the oft-discussed origins of Catholic missionary activity among Ottoman non-Muslims and the role of European patronage, the author sketches profiles of the missionaries through their own “edifying and curious letters”, traces the views Ottoman Christians and missionaries had of each other and discusses methods of conversion. The Catholic success in the provinces, built on the support of ambassadors and consuls, but also local ecclesiastical structures and even support by Ottoman provincial bureaucrats became “a driving force to unify the Greek Orthodox Patriarchs in the Ottoman Empire against Catholic missions” (p. 137).

The second driving force was the structural transformation of the Greek lay elite in Istanbul, the Phanariots. Occupying key positions in the Ottoman administration, for example as grand dragoman or interpreter to the Kapudan

Paşa, and simultaneously taking the effective administration of the Patriarchate of Constantinople into their hands, these elites established a “Phanariot domination over the Patriarchate in Istanbul” (p. 140). This process, according to Çolak, resulted in a more active policy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople: the latter first brought minor Christian communities (Ethiopians, Nestorians, Jacobites) under their authority before extending control to the national Orthodox churches of Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. Çolak pointedly calls this process an “Ottoman empowerment of the Patriarchate [of Constantinople] through the mediation of Phanariots” (p. 144).

Chapter three, “Politics in the Eastern Patriarchates in the Age of Church Centralisation”, traces the emergence of a patriarchal elite class in the eighteenth century within the Orthodox Church that contributed to the centralization of the Eastern Patriarchates in the Ottoman Empire, for which a process of homogenization involving authority is symptomatic. In order to illustrate this, Çolak proceeds to a comparison of imperial *berats* for all three Eastern Patriarchates, diachronically studying two sets for each Patriarchate, as well as synchronically the three mid-eighteenth century *berats* (pp. 154–170). Their increased quantity and specificity, but also the similarity of the latter in terms of articles included and the bureaucratic diction employed, reminiscent of the language used in the *berats* of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Çolak claims, point to the process of centralization within the Orthodox Church also happening “in the eyes of the Ottoman administration” (p. 168). Novelties regarding the patriarchs’ legal role bear witness to the building of a uniform structure by patriarchal elites involving the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates. Patriarchs came increasingly from a similar background and held greater powers.

Much of chapter three is then devoted to the tenure of Silvestros, patriarch of Antioch between 1724 and 1766. With his patriarchate, election of local Arabic-speaking patriarchs came to an end. As a chief hierarchy, he epitomizes the transformation of “the patriarchal elite class”, as Çolak claims. A study of different stages of his life – notably his competition with Serafeim/Kyrillos who was Arabic speaking and of Syrian identity and had the backing of Catholic missionaries and, ultimately, Rome – illustrates the involvement of the Ottoman administration into the patriarchates’ affairs. Though generally supporting Silvestros, the Ottoman authorities did not do so on principle, for example by accommodating different interests in removing the archbishopric of Aleppo from his control. Silvestros’s case illustrates how the Eastern patriarchs “made use of the offers” (p. 208) closeness to the Ottoman administration warranted, without the mediation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The final chapter four, “Economic Power Behind Politics: Networks of Lay and Ecclesiastical Power in the 18th Century Ottoman Empire”, adds an

economic dimension to the processes examined beforehand by inquiring into the economic activities of the Eastern Patriarchates outside their normal jurisdiction, within the newly built lay and ecclesiastical networks. In Çolak's words, the chapter explores "the financial infrastructure behind the patriarchal politics" (p. 236). Focusing particularly on the Patriarchate of Jerusalem that experienced a rapprochement with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Çolak shows how the Ottoman central administration backed the possession of *vakfs*, the practice of collecting alms as well as the transfer of inheritances of Orthodox testators to the Eastern Patriarchates. These rights were granted in the framework of *berats* of investiture and renewed in separate documents. The patriarchs of Jerusalem pursued their economic activities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on an empire-wide scale among the Orthodox populations, not only in Moldavia and Wallachia. In case of conflict with other non-Muslim communities residing in these places, who occasionally interfered in the collection of incomes and inheritances by the Patriarchate's clergymen, complaints and petitions were sent to the Ottoman central administration. The latter checked the rights of the complainant and issued orders to act in accordance with the demands of the patriarch of Jerusalem, thus facilitating these financial activities. The financial practices examined, according to Çolak, were not special to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem; the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria were invested with the same rights to collect alms outside their jurisdiction and made use of them.

Throughout Çolak's book, the importance of "centralization" as an explanatory grid emerges clearly. While the careful analyses of the developments the author sees connected with this process yield significant results, the value of the "centralization" paradigm itself is debatable. Instead of opposing the notion of a process of "decentralization" going hand in hand with the rise of local power holders in the provinces with an inversion of the same thesis for the policies and organization of the Orthodox Church, it seems preferable to renounce static notions of "centralization" and "decentralization" altogether. Obviously, neither of the concepts works on all levels of society and policies in the eighteenth century Ottoman empire without serious reservations. Instead, both of them seem to obscure to a certain degree the dialectics, dynamic interactions and negotiations taking place between power centres of different kinds. It would be interesting to see some of the phenomena observed and examined by Çolak in the light of different sets of questions and explanatory grids. One of them certainly concerns the role of notables, as the author himself observes in an outlook on future research (p. 244). Notables have been identified as important actors in the provinces and seem to emerge as major players in the contexts Çolak examines as well.

The ties between such elites in the provinces and the capital remain to be investigated.

Turning from the conceptual level to the insightful analyses *The Orthodox Church in the Early Modern Middle East* presents, a curious tension in Çolak's engagement with texts can be observed. In certain parts, the terms "sources" and "documents" occur frequently. Textual witnesses, as for example letters now and then appear somewhat reduced to displays of factual information – but what about the role of narration, one might ask? How were arguments negotiated, with which textual strategies and why? Even where letters are quoted in greater detail throughout the book, the analysis sometimes moves on the level of content; quotations from the texts have more of an ornamental function. This can go as far as in subchapter 2.f, where Çolak investigates the expansion of the Patriarch Silvestros's control over Antiochian metropolitantes, reflecting on "the best source for determining the true case" (p. 200) – a notion that brings to mind Leopold von Ranke's quest for history "wie es eigentlich gewesen". Here, a quest for historical veracity overrides all considerations for possible strategies in staking claims and pursuing agendas hidden between the lines.

Somewhat oddly contrasting with this view of texts, some – very notable – analyses of texts stand out in Çolak's work. One of them is the author's treatment of the struggle between Kyrillos and Athanasios for the Patriarchal throne of Antioch in the seventeenth century (pp. 90–96). In a letter dated sometime between 25 May and 25 June 1683, Kyrillos dwells on his sending a box of fruit to the sultan in order to further his requests, noting in the margin of the letter that another box already sent had obviously perished on the way. Çolak brilliantly observes that the image of the fruit box sheds light on the licences and limits in Kyrillos's negotiations with the Porte. The letter is telling, *especially* where it is read between the lines.

Two more fascinating close readings are included in chapter three. The comparative study of the *berats*, which also includes reflections on diction, has already been mentioned above. In the same chapter, Çolak also examines the language with which Arabic-speaking Christians were differentiated in almost ethnic terms in the correspondence of Eastern Patriarchs with the Ottomans (pp. 151–153). References to an "Arab Orthodox community" (*Arab Rum taifesi*) hint at the struggle of local communities, probably Catholic, for political representation before the state – a state that did not officially acknowledge the new divisions among its Orthodox subjects. In view of recent scholarly attempts to come to grips with problems of identity and self-representation, such insights are invaluable. One wishes Çolak would have included more close readings of this kind in his book.

To sum up, Çolak's work is a significant contribution, in its scope and intention as well as in the results it presents. Çolak succeeds in decentring authority and challenges scholarly conceptions inherited from the nineteenth century Orthodox Church that put the Patriarch of Constantinople on top of the whole church organization. He embeds the history of the Orthodox patriarchates in a meaningful new complex and dynamic network of relations. These intricately interwoven processes of accommodation and competition, crisis and cooperation can only emerge this clearly from a diachronic study such as Çolak's, a study based on a vast array of texts of different genres, written down in different languages by different actors, for different purposes on different levels of church hierarchy and the Ottoman administrative apparatus. *The Orthodox Church* is certainly a trend-setting work in that it liberates the study of the Eastern Orthodox Churches from the narrow confines of an ecclesiastical history severed from regional and international politics and economic considerations. Most importantly, it casts severe doubts on a solipsistic study of Oriental Christianity, to this day pursued in some cases by scholars blithely unaware of Christianity's fundamental relatedness to the Ottoman society of which it was a part – a society to which Christians belonged just as much as the sultan's Muslim subjects.

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