CHAPTER 15

(In)tolerant Ottomans: Polemic, Perspective and the Reading of Primary Sources

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‘He impales on fence posts, flays, burns, boils, hangs, and drowns the saints of God, Shedding innocent blood without measure or restraint’.1

Introduction

The quote at the beginning of this article epitomizes the view of many early modern writers that the Ottomans were driven by a merciless desire to expand the dār al-Islām and in the process eradicate or convert all non-Muslims they encountered. That such persecution was not limited solely to non-Muslim communities that they conquered, but also extended to non-Muslims resident in the Ottoman Empire is evident in the title of a sub-section of John Cartwright’s The Preacher’s Travels: ‘[t]he Miserable thralldom of the Christians under the Turkish tyranny’.2 In a wide variety of texts including histories, travel and captivity narratives, polemical tracts, sermons, and plays, the Ottoman Empire is presented as a place of untold misery and oppression for non-Muslims, who are subject to forcible conversion, excessive taxation, random acts of brutality, and are prevented from freely practising their religion.3

3 See the extracts from various captivity narratives in Daniel Vitkus (ed.), Piracy, Slavery, and
Yet, there is abundant evidence in early modern primary sources and contemporary secondary sources that non-Muslim Ottomans were accorded freedom of worship in their own churches and synagogues, and significant intra-communal economic, administrative, and judicial autonomy. While the degree of religious tolerance practised by the Ottomans might not match some twenty-first century expectations, it certainly exceeded that of early modern Europe. Despite this overwhelming evidence of Ottoman state toleration towards its non-Muslim subjects, the perception of Ottoman cruelty and intolerance is perpetuated in the work of some modern historians, journalists and polemicists. For example, the Habsburg historian Paula Fichtner, in her work on Habsburg representations of the Ottoman Empire, conflates Ottoman imperial and territorial expansionist ambitions with a desire for religious domination, and therefore interprets all Ottoman official state rhetoric accordingly, without analysing the various functions such pronouncements were intended to serve, nor assessing the degree to which they reflected and cohered with actual Ottoman practices and motivations. She encourages readers to position the Ottomans as early modern precursors to twenty-first century Islamists—reactionary, fundamentalist militants determined to destroy Christianity—a position that is reinforced by her discussion, in the introduction to the book, of the 2001 September 11 attacks on America.4
