

## British Authors on Ottoman Tolerance

### *Interfaith Kosovo 13/Aug/2015*

There is a famous routine in Monty Python's *The life of Brian* that might be equally applied to the Ottoman Empire:

Q: So, what have the Ottomans ever done for us?

A: Coffee drinking. They give us that, and algebra.

Degree granting universities, the camera...

Preservation and translation of ancient Greek philosophy and other major contributions to the age of enlightenment...

Q: Well, all right, all right, apart from coffee drinking, algebra, degree granting universities, the camera, preservation and translation of ancient Greek philosophy and other major contributions to the enlightenment, what did the Ottomans ever do for us?

A: There was religious tolerance, what about religious tolerance?

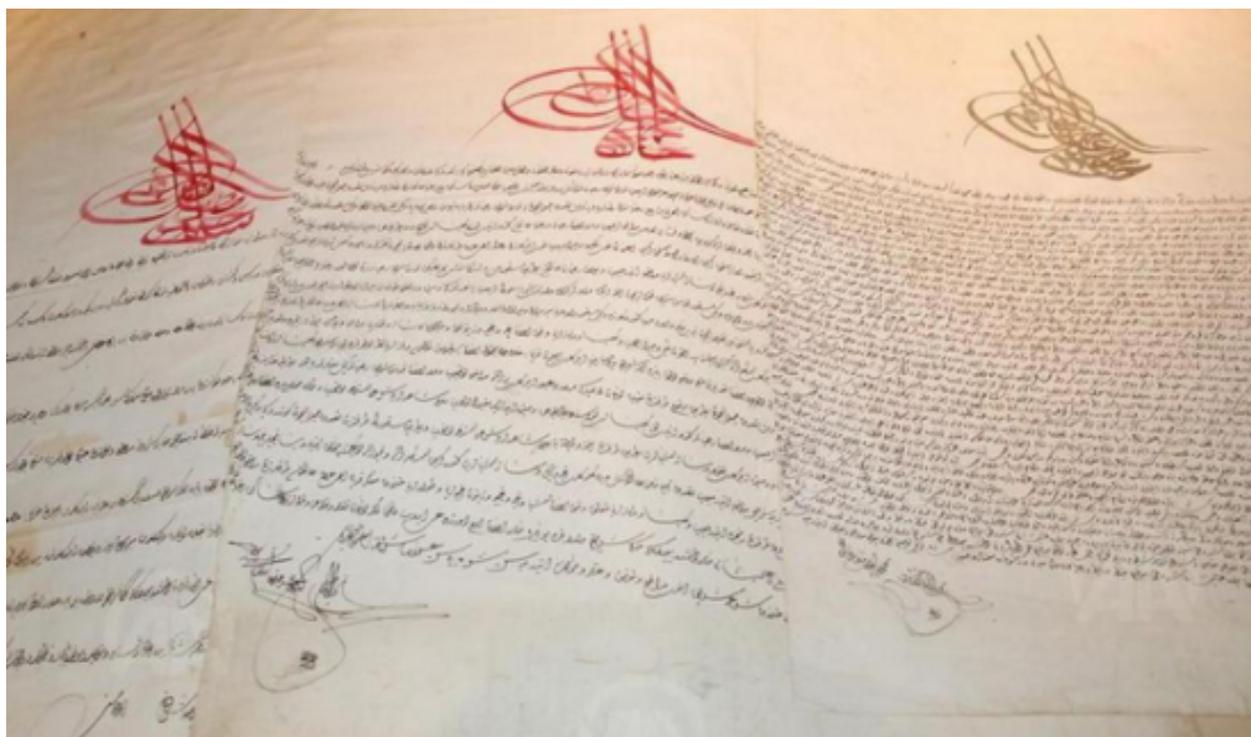
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When reading certain Christian religious histories of the Balkans today one could be forgiven for thinking that the days of the Sultans were *only* filled with decline, decay, darkness and the unbearable burden of the 'Ottoman Yoke.' While recognising human suffering – and all empire building dynasties have caused suffering – it is also important to remember pluralistic attitudes of governance, such as those of religious tolerance displayed during the Ottoman era. Let's not get carried away in idealising the past though: tolerance is in some ways both a high achievement and a low expectation. To tolerate something is not so profound, it doesn't necessarily mean a loving embrace in deep divine harmony, but it can be the building block towards such a result. According to social scientists J. Bannister and A. Kearns: "Tolerance requires respect and empathy, the recognition of the legitimacy of difference."

Today's history books are littered with references by British writers referring to Ottoman tolerance. Even this morning I read of Charles Glass's book *Burning Syria* describing: "the cohabitation of religious groups under the Ottoman banner, with the imperial line's policy seemingly to govern well, govern little." The violence and destruction we see in Syria today being the antithesis of this tolerance. In *'Why Kosovo Still Matters'* Denis MacShane articulates: "Ottoman rule was based on tolerance of religion provided the areas under their control supplied men in time of war." Religious faith of Kosovans, he suggests, remains: "a fascinating example of European tolerance." In *Sacred Imaginations* William Dalrymple describes a religious coexistence running throughout the arc of the empire: "*Under the capricious thumb of the Ottoman sultans, the different faiths, tribes and ethnicities of the Ottoman empire had lived, if not in complete harmony, then at least in a kind of pluralist equilibrium: an interwoven patchwork of different communities living separately, yet side by side.*" Mark Marzower, in *City of Ghosts*, cites reports of a 'happy rapprochement' between the faiths in the imperial city of Thessaloniki: "*Young Muslim boys served as apprentices to Christian shoe makers; Jewish and Muslim hamals and casual laboureres scoured the docks together for work. When well off Muslim families employed Jewish and Christian servants and milk-nurses, the children of the families became 'milk-brothers,' a relationship which could endure for many years.*"

The frustrations all these Anglo authors apparently don't express when describing religious tolerance are national perspectives: Albanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Croatian, etc. etc. But how could they possibly reconcile all these perspectives? There is no single narrative of past in any nation and any nation that promotes such a notion invariably seems to build it on grievance.

Denis MacShane, for instance, describes English nationalism of the 19th century as looking: “back to sturdy Anglo-Saxon peasantry placed under the cruelties of the Norman Yoke” – with Robin Hood as the mythological hero. Most nationalistic histories have been reconstructed relatively recently; most are post 1850. They are late amendments to history that often suffer under the strain of rigorous scrutiny because of what they exclude. Difficulties arise when gathering historical truths because, as Tim Juddha suggests of the Balkans: “History is war by other means.” So far be it for me to wade into such a minefield unarmed. Perhaps at bottom of this war though, are differences expressed through selective readings of history: modern readings that sometimes make monsters out of mild mannered men. We need clear heads and scientific analysis to navigate such battlefields.



Decani Monastery in Kosovo has 150 Ottoman documents (15-19 c) guaranteeing protection & other privileges.

Nation building through mythology, grievance and selective reconstruction of history is a phenomena well understood by today's academics. A recent gathering of academics in Thessaloniki identified numerous building blocks in the formation of nation state ideologies; a deep breath is required to run through just some of them: mythologized heroes; a glorious past; a sense of superiority; ever present external treats; parallel monologues – two states with differing stories; histories of victimhood and martyrdom, often taught in school; modern crisis based on past traumas; selection and authentication of history as a political process; dehumanising histories of the other using terms like barbarian and uncivilized; and finally 'banal nationalism,' subconsciously embedding these narratives, reinforced by the media. If we're completely honest all of us can identify with at least some of these building blocks – as there probably isn't a state in the world that hasn't used them to build identity. In his book "J" Booker prize-winning author Howard Jacobson argues nations and states need these division, need these necessary opposites, to define themselves.

No system of governance has yet achieved perfection. It's true that during the long era of Ottoman tolerance there were practices, such as taking child soldiers, that today we deem unacceptable. There were also favoured religions and geostrategic allegiances within the empire, such as deals between the Ottomans and Orthodoxy. The religious distinction, however, was not between Christianity and Islam but between what kind of Christian you were – were you Eastern or Western? Orthodox or Catholic? This Christian split, a geo-political consequence of a much earlier division of the Roman Empire resulting in the great schism, is a fault line whose consequences still run through Kosovo today: Prishtina, note, lies

dead geo-center between the ancient seats of Orthodoxy and Catholicism – Rome and Constantinople. Despite these imperfections of Empire, it is my conviction that any religious tolerance that survives today in the Balkans is a significant residual gift of the long rule of the Ottomans. I see it in the daily respect afforded me in Kosovo – a product of a culture significantly influenced by more than half a millennium of Islam – and the Ottoman Empire. This is a tolerance that was shattered not by a sudden inhospitality to the foreigner, but by a sudden hatred towards neighbour. The fall of Empire and rise of competing nation states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned once tolerant peoples against each other.

Today distance from the epicentres of empire and nation building can promote honest self-appraisal of these forces. National self-criticism, sometimes vehement, is certainly present in British, German and Greek academic historical studies, to name but a few – as a recent debate at Oxford on the British Empire's contribution to Indian economy and culture exemplifies – the motion: 'did the empire make a positive contribution?' was lost. Countries that once ran empires can today demonstrate maturity by their willingness to recognize and debate errors of the past; but for countries still surfacing through fervent nationalism this is indeed an on going test of maturity. As writers from a faded Empire, the collection of British authors presented here have the privilege of being removed from nationalistic agendas. They have no overt nation-building axe to grind and as a result can see Ottoman policy for what it was, imperfect maybe; of it's time, yes; religiously tolerant, certainly.