OVERVIEW OF THE MILLET SYSTEM

The Ottoman Empire was born in the 15th century when the Ottomans conquered the eastern Byzantine Empire and its capital, Constantinople, in 1453 under the rule of Sultan Mehmed II (pictured). By the 16th century, under Sultan Suleiman I, the empire reached its peak, and the Ottomans ruled parts of Eastern Europe, southwestern Asia, and northern Africa.

As the empire grew into Europe, more and more non-Muslims came under Ottoman authority. For example, in the 1530s, over 80% of the population in Ottoman Europe was not Muslim. In order to deal with these new Ottoman subjects, Mehmed instituted a new system, later called the millet system.

Under this system, each religious group was organized into a *millet*. Millet comes from the Arabic word for "nation," indicating that the Ottomans considered themselves the protectors of multiple nations. The self-governing millets were created on the basis of religious affiliation because ideas of ethnicity and nationalism did not reach the Ottoman Empire until the late 19th century. The three main non-Muslim millets were Orthodox Christian, Jewish, and Armenian (of which the Orthodox Christian millet was the first and largest millet since Constantinople had historically been the center of the Orthodox Christian world, and still had a large Christian population). There was also a Muslim millet, which was "superior" compared to the other millets because it shared the same religion as that of the rulers. The Ottoman Empire related to Christians and Jews as *dhimmmis,* which meant that they were "people of the book". As such, they were protected and allowed religious freedom, but were required to pay a special tax, called *cizye*. Thus religious minorities were able to maintain their customs so long as they showed loyalty to the sultan.

Each millet was allowed to elect its own religious figure to lead them. In the case of the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Patriarch (the Archbishop of Constantinople) was the elected leader of the millet. The leaders of the millets were allowed to enforce their own religion's rules on their people. Islamic law (Shariah) had no jurisdiction over non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. The leader was also obliged to ensure payment of taxes and obedience to the empire. Each millet thus had its own administrative, social, legal, and educational systems. By organizing society in this way, the Ottomans made sure

that no single authority figure would be able to dominate the whole community, be it Muslim or non-Muslim.

When intercommunal conflicts did arise, they were not allowed to spiral out of control. Most of the cases brought to court were related to matters of trade, or financial exchanges, members of different communities engaged in daily life. In cases of crime, people would be punished according to the rules of their own religion, not Islamic rules or rules of other religions. For example, if a Christian were to steal, he would be punished according to the Christian laws regarding theft. If a Jew were to steal, he were to be punished according to Jewish laws, etc. The only time Islamic law would come into account was if the criminal was a Muslim, or when there was a case involving two people from different millets. In that case, a Muslim judge was to preside over the case and judge according to his best judgment and common law.

The millet system did not last until the end of the Ottoman Empire. As the empire weakened in the 1700s and 1800s, European intervention in the empire expanded. When the liberal *Tanzimat* (an attempt to "modernize" the Ottoman Empire) were passed in the 1800s, the millet system was abolished, in favor of a more European-style secularist government. The Ottomans were forced to guarantee vague "rights" to religious minorities, which in fact limited their freedoms. Instead of being allowed to rule themselves according to their own rules, all religious groups were forced to follow the same set of secular laws. This actually ended up causing more religious tension in the empire and played a role in its downfall.

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