

Cooperation with the Empire: The Rise of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century

Masayuki Ueno

During the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire witnessed the parallel rise of the Istanbul patriarchates of the two largest non-Muslim groups: Orthodox Christians and Armenians. These patriarchates had hitherto been two of several religious authorities with limited geographical jurisdiction and qualified power. In the eighteenth century, however, the Istanbul patriarchates of the two churches extended the geographical scope of their jurisdiction at the expense of other religious authorities, extracted additional rights from the government, and enjoyed a considerably improved status in their relationships with state officials and with each confessional community. This paper explores the inadequately studied case of the Armenian patriarchate through a comparison with that of Orthodox Christians. It thus contributes to our understanding of the parallel rise of the two patriarchates and the subsequent development of the organizational framework that twentieth-century researchers have misleadingly named the millet system. Hence, the paper considers how the rights and jurisdiction of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul expanded, and why the government of a multireligious empire allowed the holders of this office to accrue greater authority.

The investigation of Ottoman documents suggests that, unlike the Orthodox Christian patriarchs, financial concerns were not crucial to the Ottoman Empire's approach to the Armenian patriarchs; more important was the political usefulness of the Armenian patriarchs as a means of opposing encroachment by Catholic missionaries. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire began to take a persistent, negative attitude toward Catholic missionaries and the conversion of its subjects. This shift allowed the anti-Catholic faction among the Armenians to dominate Catholic sympathizers and to extract additional rights for the patriarchate from the Ottoman government.